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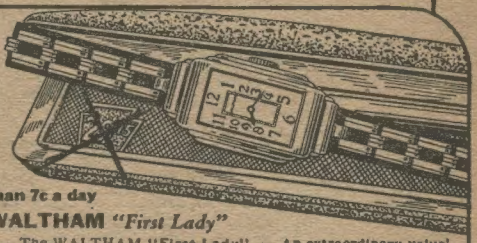

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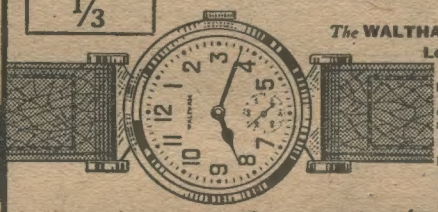

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Vol. 6 OCTOBER, 1936 No. 4

ONE FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL

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For gold at the end of the gun-glory trail, "Preacher" Devlin tried bargaining with La Lagartija, dreaded queen of the border raiders.

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Cover by William E. Luberoff

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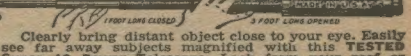

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EARNINGS

One man in California earned over $1,600 per month for three months—close to $5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A Connecticut man writes he has made $55.00 in a single day's time. Texas man nets over $300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from $5 to $60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

Not a "Gadget"— Not a "Knick-Knack"—

but a valuable, proved device which has been sold successfully by business novices as well as seasoned veterans.

Make no mistake—this is no novelty—no flimsy creation which the inventor hopes to put on the market. You probably have seen nothing like it yet—perhaps never dreamed of the existence of such a device—yet it has already been used by corporations of outstanding prominence—by dealers of great corporations—by their branches—by doctors, newspapers, publishers—schools—hospitals, etc., etc., and by thousands of small business men. You don't have to convince a man that he should use an electric bulb to light his office instead of a gas lamp. Nor do you have to sell the same business man the idea that some day he may need something like this invention. The need is already there—the money is usually being spent right at that very moment—and the desirability of saving the greatest part of this expense is obvious immediately.

Some of the Savings You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for $11 which formerly could have cost them over $200. A building supply corporation pays our man $70, whereas the bill could have been for $1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative $15, whereas the expense could have been over $1,000. A department store has expense of $88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over $2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a $7.50 order, $5.83 can be your share. On $1,500 worth of business, your share can be $1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth $6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth $67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has Nothing to Do With House to House Canvassing

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousands.

No Money Need Be Risked

in trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. *If you are looking for a business that is not overcrowded*—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can set foot—regardless of size—*that is a necessity* but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—*that pays more on some individual sales than many men make in a week and sometimes in a month's time*—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, *get in touch with us at once* for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, *use the coupon below*—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. But do it now. *Address*

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The Gun-Glory Trail

"Preacher Devlin" Novel

By L. L. Foreman

Author of "Hangtree's Plunder," etc.

For gold at the end of the gun-glory trail, "Preacher" Devlin was willing to barter with even La Lagartija, dreaded queen of the border raiders. For the hawk-faced Preacher shaped life and law to suit himself, and would bargain with the devil for a slice of hell.

CHAPTER I

Wolves of War

THE parched badlands of *El Rojo Desierto* lay still and sullen in the shimmering hot air. Overhead, a malignant sun poured its pitiless rays down and made an inferno of a lost country long forgotten by nature's kindlier elements. Silence lay like a pall over the forbidding hell-bottoms.

A place of solitude and inert lifelessness, it seemed steeped in all the

dark and brooding fatalism of Old Mexico. Time moved slowly here, and lagged a thousand years behind the age of civilization.

Incongruous in the deathlike quiet, a bugle raised its brassy voice against the silence. The call, muted yet distinct, ended on a quavering note, and the sobbing echoes cried back faintly from the broken hills.

Behind a rimrock ridge, down in a sheltered bowl in the desert's floor, lounging men stirred to activity at the call. A motley, well-armed crew, they looked what they were—an army of case-hardened border raiders, freebooters of the Mexican desert, human wolves, renegades, run-amucks. They trotted over to the center of the bowl, where a black silk tent stood starkly against the white sand.

The flap of the tent lifted, and a scar-faced old ruffian stepped forth. "Silence, *hombres!*" he commanded in a guttural mixture of Spanish and Indian. "*La Lagartija* speaks."

A moment of deep silence, and the flap of the silken tent lifted again. A slender figure stepped out into the glaring sunlight. It was a gracefully elegant figure, dressed in rich *charro* garb, from glittering black half-boots to the fine velvet *chaquita*. A pair of pearl-handled six-guns in silver-studded holsters hung flat against the slim hips.

The oval face was a light golden tan, crowned with a thick mass of lustrous raven-black hair. Beautiful it was, with its carmine lips, perfect features and glowing eyes. They were not black, those eyes, but tawny, like the eyes of a lizard. Brilliant, lambent, fascinating as strange jewels, uncanny power and mystery were in their liquid depths.

THIS was *La Lagartija*—the Lizard. Her strange eyes had given her that name, and she was known by no other, though some called her devil-woman, and some called her angel. Quixotic, incomprehensible, she could be as cruel as a tigress, or as gentle as a kitten.

"*Hola, mis hombres!*" spoke *La Lagartija*, and her voice was as musical as the muted strings of a violin. "Henrique has just returned from above the border." She gestured to a swarthy Yaqui nearby. "He brings news of men who speak not truth about your *jefa*."

A harsh growl swept through the massed mob of renegades. Calloused fingers fondly nursed the smooth steel of carbines, worn gun-butts, and the ugly black hafts of slender *cuchillos*. Lies told about their worshipped leader, *La Lagartija?* Those liars courted death!

"You all know the King Fortune silver-mine, on the edge of Borderline," went on *La Lagartija*. "You know also that their shipments of silver bullion are being raided. Not by us, unfortunately."

"No, not by us," growled Lazaro, her grizzled old *segundo*. "We camp here while our great *jefa* dreams, and other men of fortune grow rich on *gringo* wealth!"

His *jefa* glanced at him, and he subsided.

"The King Fortune mine is owned by an old *gringo*—a *Senor* Parramore," continued *La Lagartija*. "It seems that this old gringo thinks we are the robbers of his silver. He has offered ten thousand *pesos* for my head. What answer do we give to the old *zopilote?*"

"Death!" The word thundered from a hundred leathery throats. "Death, *jefa*—nothing less!"

The *bandido jefa* gracefully inclined her beautiful head. "I agree," she replied, and her full lips parted in a gentle smile. "Tomorrow we take our answer to this old *Senor* Parramore, with our compliments! And while we are there in Borderline we shall show these *gringos* that when we want silver, we take it from the source—not in paltry dribbles!"

A roar went up. Eager eyes flashed, and carbines were shaken by hairy fists. *"Ai!* When we rob, we rob the nest—not the weak fledglings!"

La Lagartija smiled again, and her brilliant golden eyes played over her fierce horde of fighters. "No more words!" she called lightly. "Tomorrow we ride!"

The answer came back in a deafening echo. "Tomorrow we ride!"

HART RAMAGE stood in front of the Silver Stirrup Hotel on the following day, his tall young body lounged against the hitchrack. Ruggedly handsome, his skin burned to the color of saddle-leather, he had the lean, hard look of a man more accustomed to the open country than to confining walls.

The sun, two hours old, shone down on the crooked main street of Borderline. It picked out with relentless light the blatant false-fronts of the many saloons and store buildings, and showed the unlovely outlines of the big mine workings at the northern edge of town, the timbers flung up against the blue sky like giant scaffolds.

Borderline was a live mining town, bustling and opulent, and the backbone of Borderline was the big King Fortune silver-mine. Up on a hill, two hundred yards from the great workings, the shining white house of Caleb Parramore reared its imposing bulk. That tall white house was symbolic of Caleb Parramore, sole owner of the King Fortune. When he spoke, other men listened with respect. When he issued orders, they hastened to obey.

Hart Ramage stared moodily up the bluff at the house of Parramore, ocassionally flicking a glance at the door of the general store across the street.

When a girl came out of the store, respectfully escorted by the obsequious proprietor, Hart Ramage ducked with lithe grace under the hitchrack and was beside her in half a dozen long strides. "Mornin', Nada," he greeted her, with a boyish grin. "Gosh, it takes you a long time to shop. I've been waitin'—"

"Hart!" There was both dismay and gladness in the girl's tone. Her fresh young face paled, then flushed. "You didn't leave, Hart! But you must! If my father learns that you've defied him, he'll—"

"He'll what?" asked Hart Ramage quietly. "Listen, Nada—this is a free town, an' I'm a free man. Your father fired me, but he can't run me out of Borderline. He acted pretty raw yesterday, firin' me off the job just because you an' I are friendly. What's he got against me, anyway?"

Nada Parramore sighed. "Father says you're just another drifting Texan," she explained sadly. "He admits you're a good mining engineer, but he doesn't like your background. He claims that he never knew a Texas cattleman who would stick to anything but cattle for very long. And he doesn't like Texans—nor cattlemen."

"Why?" demanded Hart. "I heard he used to have a ranch, himself, somewhere in Texas, before he went mining."

The girl nodded. "Yes, he did," she agreed. "And that's the reason. He had some kind of trouble with his Texan neighbors. They combined and forced him to leave the country. He has hated Texas cattlemen ever since. I tried to explain to him that you're a mining man now, like himself, but he wouldn't listen."

"So that's it," murmured the young Texan. "I'm a no-'count driftin' cowman from Texas, spite o' being as good a mining engineer as he is, eh? But you like me, don't you, Nada?"

The girl flushed again, and looked away. "Why—yes," she confessed. "I—I like you, Hart." That was an understatement, and both knew it. They had been drawn together since the first time they met, a month ago. Both were much the same type; honest, clean-cut, direct in speech and action. They made a handsome pair; the man

so tall, bronzed and level-eyed; the girl a picture of healthy young womanhood, slim and erect, in the full bloom of her fresh young beauty.

NEITHER noticed two horsemen riding down the path from the big white house, into the crooked main street. One, a stiff ramrod of a man with a trimmed gray beard, sat squarely in his saddle as though defying anything to dislodge him. The other, a younger man, darkly handsome and inclined to beefiness, had the smugly satisfied look of a man who found life easy. Both were well dressed and well mounted.

"So you're still around, eh, Ramage?"

Hart Ramage turned with a jerk, and found two pairs of eyes regarding him with cold unfriendliness. "Yes, I'm still here, Mr. Parramore," he answered evenly.

Caleb Parramore stroked his neat beard. His eyes narrowed. He ignored his daughter. Later on, in privacy, he would talk to her—cold, cutting words that would sting like the lash of a whip. Right now he would attend to this young Texas upstart, this drifting adventurer, and send him packing on his way.

All along the street, men had ceased their idle talk to stare and listen. Others came to the doors of saloons and stores to peer out, as word swiftly went around that a young fool of a Texan was daring to defy Parramore. The townsmen exchanged significant glances. They were ready to back up any play that the mine-owner might choose to make. To buck Caleb Parramore was to buck all Borderline.

"Which way would you prefer to leave town, Ramage?" purred Caleb Parramore. "With or without an escort?"

"Neither," replied Hart Ramage. "I'm stayin'!"

"We've got a nice graveyard here!" observed Parramore gently.

The dark young man with him gave a short laugh. "Plenty o' room in it, too!" he remarked. He was Newt Gowert, Parramore's mine manager and right-hand man. He was also Parramore's nephew, and, except for Nada, the old tyrant's only remaining kin.

Hart's lean face tightened. "You can keep out o' this, Gowert!" he said curtly. "Unless," he added softly, "you're aiming to do more than just talk!"

Newt Gowert looked sidewise at his uncle. Caleb Parramore made a quick sign with a forefinger. Gowert grinned faintly. He darted a glance at a knot of men across the street, and nodded slightly. The men came walking over, stepping with the queerly deliberate gait of trouble-seekers, their hands brushing the butts of their holstered guns.

Caleb Parramore snapped an order to his daughter. "Go back to the house, Nada!"

The girl hesitated, a hint of troubled rebellion in her clear eyes. She had not noticed the advancing men. Her father's hard stare bored into her, commanding her to do his bidding as she had done all her life. She bowed her head and mounted her pony. To stay might make things worse. She touched heel to flank, and with a final unhappy look at Hart, let her mount plod up the street at a walk.

The half-dozen gunsters halted in the middle of the street, staring silently at Hart Ramage. The Texan stared back at them, and read the cold purpose in their eyes. His hands dropped to his holster, and he waited.

Newt Gowert, grinning thinly, carefully backed his horse and himself out of line of fire. Caleb Parramore, as arrogantly contemptuous of danger as he was of most things, did not move his position. He sat in his saddle, looking on, like a hanging-judge watching an execution that he had ordered.

CHAPTER II

Trigger Treasure

DOWN the main Street of Borderline, while Ramage waited, came a lone horseman, traveling at a leisurely gait. Against the sun-bleached buildings, horse and rider stood out in startling black silhouette. The horse, a big, powerful, long-legged brute, bore no splash of color but the streaks of desert dust that lay on its sleek ebony coat.

The rider, too, gave the impression of raw strength and ruthless power. A giant of a man, there was about him an air of grim mastery and arrogant assurance. Like his great muscular horse, he loomed black and sharp against his surroundings. A long coat, black and funereal, hung to his boot-tops. His hat, flat-crowned, with a sweeping brim, added its strangely clerical note to the somber appearance of the big rider.

The townsmen eyed the stranger, stared at the queerly ministerial garb, then at the hawklike face under the black hat-brim. The funereal garb hinted at a preacher, a wandering circuit rider. But not so the face. It was hard, sharp-chiseled and austere—the face of a sardonic devil. And above the jutting, predatory nose two chill gray eyes looked out with stony calm at the world.

Those eyes were quiet, bleakly remote, Satanic. They gave the keynote to the man. A killer. And the hands—long, slim, with controlled muscles—were trained hands. Trained to fast action. No holy man, this. No furtive lobo, either. Here was a man who shaped life and law to suit himself, crushing with cold-blooded efficiency those foolhardy enough to oppose him.

A whisper swept through the townsmen.

"Hell—thet's 'Preacher' Devlin!"

"Yeah, it's him, all right! Wonder what thet hell-ripper wants in these parts?"

The man called Preacher Devlin let his cold gray eyes rove about him as he rode slowly down the dusty street. That was habit, the habit of a lone wolf who stayed alive only by ceaseless vigilance and hair-trigger action. When he came up near the little crowd in front of the general store, he pulled to a halt and sat there watching.

The scene carried its own significance. The tall young fellow was being pushed into a cold deck kill-game. He was bucking half a dozen professional gunslingers. When the blow-off came, he would likely find this was not his lucky day. And the blow-off was imminent. The crouching tenseness of the gunsters told that. But the young fellow had nerve. He wasn't backing down. He was coolly waiting for them to start the play.

Preacher Devlin drew a long black cigar from his pocket and chewed on the end. He watched the tableau with mildly cynical eyes. The young fellow had probably brought this on himself. Looked like a Texan. Texans were like that. A man's fight was his own affair. Let him fight his way out.

One of the Borderline gunsters made a movement and let his palms touch his holsters. Hart Ramage matched it by letting his fingers rest on his gun-butt. Out of the corner of his eye, the Texan saw Parramore and Gowert watching. Beyond, a strange black rider sat looking on. Beyond him, Nada Parramore rode slowly up toward the white house. She had not looked back.

Hart switched his gaze back to the men facing him. He hadn't a chance, and he knew it. Six against one. Six double-gunned trigger-hirelings, eager to kill and earn their blood-money. Hard cases. He wished they'd open the play and get done with it. His back-hairs were tingling. Perhaps if he drew now, instead of waiting . . . .

A heavy rumbling sounded, grew rapidly louder, and resolved into the rolling beat of many racing hoofs. Heads jerked toward the south, whence came the sound. The half-

dozen gunmen shifted, frowned, and cast uneasy glances at Parramore and his nephew.

"What the devil!" muttered Gowert. "Is it a posse coming into town? Sounds like a damned army on the gallop! From the south, too. That's—"

"Look out!" The cry of warning came from some men at the nearest bend of the street. "Bandits! Spic bandits! Raid!"

In an instant men were streaking for the nearest cover, shouting and yelling the alarm. Above the noise and confusion came a shrieking, many-voiced battle cry.

"La Lagartija!"

HART RAMAGE found himself alone. The gunsters had forgotten him, and melted off. Caleb Parramore and Gowert were swinging their mounts around for a dash to the livery stable, a short way down the street. The young Texan felt a little dazed by the abrupt shifting of danger.

"Wake up, hombre!" barked a deep voice. "Sounds like *La Lagartija* is on the rampage! An' that little lady's a —here they come! Grab hold o' my saddle-horn if you want to keep your hide in shape!"

Hart leaped to the black horse and gripped the saddle-horn. The somber-garbed rider touched heel. The big animal spun around and plunged down the street, dragging the Texan along in great leaping strides.

The double doors of the livery stable were being swung shut by those inside as Devlin reached them. The tall longrider swerved his black mount in a slithering half-circle and crashed it broadside against the closing barriers, bursting them wide open again and sending men sprawling. He leaped to the ground and led the animal inside, Hart following, as a burst of gunfire rattled out.

Bullets whined down the street, spattered into walls, and shattered a score of windows. The doors of the livery stable slammed shut. Men leaped to the windows, poked guns through, and triggered fast at the yelling horde of wild riders that came thundering down the narrow street.

The raiders were firing from their saddles, standing stiff-legged in the stirrups and emptying their carbines with savage glee at everything that looked like a human target. In the front rank of the *bandido* army rode a slender figure, vividly splendid in fine *charro* garb and mounted on a beautiful cream stallion.

It was *La Lagartija,* at the head of her outlaw pack, a gun in her hand and a smile on her lips. Beside her, like a battle-scarred old eagle hovering near its young, rode her old *segundo,* the veteran Lazaro. There was a wolfish grin of pure joy on the grizzled visage of the hard old ruffian. This was the sort of thing he gloried in—a swooping raid, a good fight, and a swift return to the badland hills with much loot. *Ai!*—it was a man's life! He wanted no other.

As the renegade band drew abreast of the livery stable, *La Lagartija* held up a slim hand and called a sharp command. The word was taken up by those around her, and the whole mob drew up, yelling and laughing like wild fiends. The firing ceased as the Borderline citizens hastily ducked down out of sight.

The men in the livery stable slammed down the inside shutters over the window-holes. Devlin stood beside his horse, a glint of something like humor in his opaque gray eyes. He had not drawn his heavy guns from their hidden holsters under the ministerial coat.

"So! The great *Senor* Parramore hides his face from those he accuses!" came the mocking voice of *La Lagartija.* "Come out, old man, and be shot!"

Caleb Parramore was no coward. For a second he looked as though he would accept the taunting challenge. Then he breathed an oath. "I'll hunt you down for this, woman!" he shouted back, purple with fury. "I'll see you

in chains and all your scum wiped out, some day!"

A musical laugh tinkled outside. "He makes threats!" cried the *La Lagartija* amusedly. "The foolish old crow threatens his hunters! Set fire to that building! We are in haste, but perhaps we can spare the time to singe the old crow's feathers! Build a fire around it, *pronto!*"

"If you do that, Conchita," drawled Devlin, his deep, penetrating voice cutting through the gleeful laughter, "reckon I'll have to take a hand in this thing!"

For a moment there was dead silence. Then the voice of *La Lagartija* sounded again, tense and incredulous. "Could that have been the voice of *Don Predicador*—The Preacher?" she called wonderingly. "The voice of his ghost, perhaps—coming from the Pit? Can it be that a kind fate has once more made our trails cross? Speak again—*Don Predicador* or his ghost—and let my foolish heart learn that my ears did not lie!"

"Build the fire!" came Lazaro's growl. "Build it, *hombres!*"

"WHEN they build it, Lazaro," said Devlin gently, "have your guns ready! I'll be comin' out to see you!"

"It is he!" grunted Lazaro. "That black *diablo!* Never could I mistake that voice!"

"Nor I!" agreed *La Lagartija.* "Do not build the fire, *mis hombres.* It would not be courteous to—ah—an old friend. Nor wise, perhaps." She raised her voice. "*Don Predicador,* I am consumed with regret, but I must go. My business is pressing. You will pardon this abrupt leave-taking, *amigo?*"

"I'll try," returned the notorious gun devil drily. "*Adios, amiga.*"

"May we meet again, very soon," called the *bandido jefa.* "And you, *Senor* Parramore—give thanks to your patron saint! In the future, speak carefully of *La Lagartija!* It is not I who robs your silver trains. As the penalty of your impertinence, we are taking certain things—souvenirs of this most enjoyable visit! *Ho, mis hombres—vaya!*"

There followed a thunderous clatter of hoofs, a wild chorus of ear-splitting yells, and the horde went whooping on down the street. The firing broke out again, coming from the direction of the King Fortune mine.

Devlin led his horse to the doors, lifted the cross-bars, and flung them open. He mounted and sat looking toward the mine workings, a faint grin on his hard mouth.

Caleb Parramore, stuttering with rage, stamped up to the master gunhawk. "You're Preacher Devlin, eh?" he grated thickly "You know that *La Lagartija* hell-cat?"

Devlin nodded without shifting his eyes from the sombreroed figures that swarmed about the mine. "Yeah," he answered absently. "Nice gal! She doesn't seem to like you, Parramore."

"Damn her!" exploded the mine-owner. "Look here, Devlin—I'll pay you ten thousand dollars to bring that woman to me!"

The tall gunster looked down at him, his cold eyes stony and contemptuous. "Look somewhere else for a bounty-hunter, hombre," he drawled harshly. "*La Lagartija* gave you advice. Better take it. When you fool with her, you fool with dynamite!"

"Yeah—high-test stuff!" murmured Hart Ramage, standing nearby. He grinned at Devlin. "She's a honey, that one! No more harm in her than in fourteen wildcats an' a dozen hungry she-wolves! Sure hate to see her mussin' up your mine thataway, Mr. Parramore. What's wrong, Gowert? You're sweatin'. Warm, ain't it?"

Parramore and his nephew glared at the grinning Texan, at the impassive Devlin, and stood impotently watching the marauding raiders in the distance. A few spurts of gunfire were still coming from the outlying tool sheds, where the mine-workers had hurriedly barricaded themselves Some of the townsmen were taking

careful potshots from roofs and windows.

A bugle note rang out, one clear call. A slim figure, resplendent in glittering finery, cantered down the slope from the mine on a big cream stallion, one arm aloft. The sun's rays flashed back from the intricate gold brocade on the high-crowned sombrero, and from the silver-splashed tapideros.

The raiders came running from the mine, vaulted into their saddles like agile monkeys, and went riding after their *jefa*. Toward the west they went in a trailing cavalcade, crossed bandoleers shining brassily with cartridge shells, slung carbines bumping on calloused backs—a cheering, shrill-yelling, triumphant band of loot-lusting freebooters.

La Lagartija turned in her high-cantled saddle just before she led her wild horde around a low-lying hill on the outskirts of town. She pulled off her sombrero and waved it back at ravaged Borderline in mocking farewell, while her thick mass of lustrous hair floated out over her shoulders like a black cloud and her neckerchief flickered in the wind.

Devlin's faint grin returned, while Parramore and Gowert stood and swore. From his impersonal viewpoint, the black-garbed gunmaster had only admiration for audacity, incisive action, and cool nerve.

A man came running down the bluff from the big white house, waving his arms and shouting. As he drew nearer, his words could be distinguished.

"Miss Nada—they got Miss Nada!" he bawled frantically. "They've got her!"

CHAPTER III

Six-Gun Siesta

IN a moment he was surrounded by an excited crowd. Caleb Parramore thrust his way to the man. "What the devil are you saying, Henry?" he barked. "You mean they've taken my daughter? Ridden off with her?"

Henry nodded vigorously. "Yeah—two of 'em picked her up an 'tied her to a horse!" he gasped breathlessly. "Caught Miss Nada just as she reached the house, they did! That *La Lagartija*, she ordered 'em to do it. Told me to tell yuh they're gonna hold her for ransom—*mucho dinero*, she said!"

Parramore went white. "That—that—pah!" Words failed him. "Where's the sheriff? Where's the marshal?" he sputtered, and caught sight of them both, coming through the crowd. "Sheriff, gather a posse an' go after those damned bandits—right away! They've captured my daughter!"

The sheriff looked uncomfortable. "Ain't nary a chance o' overhaulin' 'em this side o' the border, Mr. Parramore," he said doubtfully.

"Then cross over after 'em!" rapped the mine-owner. "Nothing to stop you, is there?"

The marshal put in a word. " 'Member the warnin' we got from the Mex *rurales*, last time a posse went down over the Line, Mr. Parramore?" he remarked. "They said they'd wipe out any bunch o' gringo lawmen they found foolin' around in their territory!"

The sheriff nodded relievedly. "That's right," he muttered. "I'd be fightin' Mex lobos an' lawmen too, once I cross the Line. I'll tell yuh, Mr. Parramore—we'll send word to the *rurales* 'bout what's happened, an'—"

Caleb Parramore made a noise in his throat as though he were choking. "Yellow!" he rasped. "You're all yellow! Scared of that damned outlaw witch!" His flaming eyes lighted on Devlin, lounging unconcernedly in his saddle. "Devlin—I'll pay that same ten thousand dollars to the man who brings back my daughter!" he barked.

The notorious longrider chewed reflectively on his unlighted cigar for a moment, his bleak eyes thoughtful.

Then he nodded, and picked up his reins. "That's a deal," he said briefly as he rode by.

Loping out of Borderline, Devlin saw another horseman ahead of him. It was Hart Ramage, on a borrowed mount, riding like fury on the trail of *La Lagartija* and her renegade horde.

Parramore went stamping up to his big house, Gowert with him. The younger man was deeply thoughtful. An opportunist always, he was already scheming how to turn developments to his own advantage. He decided that the raid had been a very fine thing, as far as he was concerned.

GOWERT veiled his eyes to hide the satisfaction he knew was in them. Yes, the raid had been an excellent thing. It had removed Nada Parramore. If her removal could be made permanent, it would leave him—Gowert—as sole heir to the Parramore fortune and property.

There was a certain gang of spic *bandidos* below the border that would be willing to try to make such a removal very, very permanent. They would have to be well paid for the job, of course. Gowert had had previous dealings with them, in the matter of robbed silver shipments. It would cost money. Well, he could afford it, but— He grinned as another fiendish idea occurred to his fertile brain.

"Say, Uncle Caleb," he remarked suddenly. "Ten thousand dollars is a lot of money. You know, I b'lieve I could contact that spic bunch and ransom Nada for less *dinero* than that. Five thousand, maybe."

Parramore looked at him. "Think you could?" he grunted. "Be a dangerous job."

"I can handle myself," said his nephew airily. "Why not let me try it, eh? Be a sort o' joke on Devlin, too," he added slyly, "to beat his time. That gun-shark's too high an' mighty. Besides, he might be figgerin' to double-cross you in some way."

Parramore frowned. "He might, at that," he agreed. "All right, Newt, I'll let you try it. But first I want to see if those cursed bandits found my safe. I s'pose they cleaned out the mine strong-house. That means a week's take-in gone. Damn 'em!"

They entered the house. It was in disorder. The raiders had made hasty search for valuables, and had carried off all objects that appealed to their discerning eyes. Parramore and Gowert went straight to the long living room, joined by a few Indian servants who crept out of hiding.

The mine-owner pressed up on a strip of oak moulding. It tipped up, and a section of the seemingly solid paneling swung open, exposing the steel face of a large safe. Parramore gave a grunt of relief. He worked the dial of the combination lock, and pulled open the thick steel door.

"Five thousand you said, Newt?" he queried. "How d'you want it—big bills or gold coin?"

"Better make it coin," suggested his nephew. "Those spics love the sight of gold. Looks more that way, too, and they can share it better."

Parramore handed over five small leather bags, hard and chunky. Gowert took them and tucked them under his arm. "Well, I'm off," he announced, and contrived to look like a heroic figure bound on a dangerous mission.

Five minutes later he stuffed the leather pouches into a saddle-bag and mounted his best horse. He was in high good humor as he rode away from the house, and chuckled as he felt the hardness of the gold against his knee. Parramore would never know that his own gold had played the part of blood-money for his daughter's death!

That was a joke. Gowert almost laughed aloud at the thought of it. Passing the mine, he glanced at a few bodies that lay scattered about, victims of the Borderline snipers. One of the dead *bandidos* lay sprawled half

across the path, a grin of death stamped on his swarthy face. Gowert gave a slight shiver.

"Pity that isn't my dear Uncle Caleb!" he muttered. "To bad a bullet didn't find him! It sure would've made things simple for me. With him dead, and Nada—"

He stopped short and tightened rein, staring down at the dead raider. Another idea had occurred to him. He turned it over in his mind, but could find no flaw in it. With a quick look around to see that he was not observed, he dismounted and bent over the body.

When he straightened up again he slipped a long-bladed Mexican knife up his sleeve. With another quick look about him, he mounted again and rode on. At the back of the mine, where a great heap of discarded tailings lay piled up, he drew to a halt. It was deserted back here. Tethering his horse, he left it.

It took him fifteen minutes of cautious dodging to gain the house unobserved. He slipped in by way of a rear door. In five minutes he reappeared and snaked back to his horse. Mounting, he put spurs to the animal and rode off as though all the fiends of hell were reaching out after him.

Half an hour later a gibbering servant sprinted down the hill into Borderline town, yelling news that stunned the citizens.

"Parramore—they killed him! One of 'em musta sneaked back. The big boss—he's on the floor—knife stickin' in his back—dead!"

ABOVE the barren wastelands of *El Rojo Desierto* the sun hung suspended in a glittering blue sky. Against the craggy cliffs of *Los Muertos Collados* dark shadows etched vast and crazy patterns of purplish hue. Like a dead world, its silence was that of infinite space, where life and time did not exist.

To the two men who crouched flat on a slanting shelf of rimrock, the sun was an enemy that extracted its full tithe of burning torture as it grudgingly sank toward the west. Behind them, hidden in a shaded cleft, stood their two horses.

"'Bout three more hours," murmured Devlin, spitting the stub of his cigar at a skittering sand-lizard. "We'll go down soon's it's dark, before the moon comes up."

Hart Ramage nodded, and cautiously eased his position. Three hours to sundown. Three hours. It was an age. In his physical and mental torture, he wondered if he could hold back that long. Right now he had to keep a tight grip on himself to keep from charging down the rocky slope in berserk rage.

Down below them, in a sheltered valley of the hills, was a camp. It was a big camp, spread out all along the narrow valley. The sandy floor was dotted with colored squares of stretched *sarapes*, under which men lounged and slept in the shade. Over on the far side of the valley, in the lee of an overhanging boulder, stood a black silken tent, gleaming like polished ebony in the reflected light from the glistening sand.

La Lagartija and her untamed horde were enjoying a *siesta* here in one of their many hideouts, before pushing on into the south. The calm audacity of it was almost humorous. Secure in their own strength, confident of their superiority as fighters, they had not even posted guards to watch the back trail.

The afternoon sun had been too hot for comfortable traveling. Only fools and gringos worked or traveled when the sun was at its height. A *caballero* must needs have his *siesta*. And they were *caballeros*. *Si*. More than that, they were *caballeros des fortuna*—gentlemen of fortune. Therefore they halted for *siesta*.

To their minds there was no lesson in the knowledge that an untimely *siesta* had upset Santa Anna's chances against General Sam Houston in the

Battle of San Jacinto. To the Mexican mind it merely affirmed the already established fact that gringos were slightly mad. To attack at such an inconvenient time was not only unconventional, but also smacked of unfair tactics. It was not, Mexicans solemnly agreed, a laudable practice. They disapproved of such barbaric innovations. The *siesta* was sacred to tradition and good sense, and was not to be flouted, war or no war.

The tail-end of the afternoon dragged by, and faded into evening. The camp stirred to life as the slanting rays of the dying sun grew cooler. The *bandidos* began to gather in small groups, idly chattering as they lazed in the shade cast by the western wall of the valley.

Devlin glanced at the sinking sun, hanging like a red ball against the horizon. His eyes suddenly narrowed as he scanned the skyline beyond the hills. Little black shapes were bobbing up and coming over it along a half-mile line. He nudged Hart. The Texan looked at him and followed his glance.

"Horsemen!" he muttered. "Sure is a big bunch of 'em. What d'you make of 'em, Devlin? More of *La Lagartija's* mob, comin' to meet her?"

The somber-clad gunmaster slowly pulled a fresh cigar from his pocket and bit on the end, his keen eyes still fixed on the line of dots coming over the horizon. "Reckon not," he murmured. "They're ridin' in fightin' formation, the way *bandidos* ride when they're on the prowl."

"I don't like it," said Hart.

Devlin shook his head slightly. "We'll know what they are, pretty soon," he remarked. "If they don't holler an' make themselves known, then they're no friends of *La Lagartija*. May be enemies o' hers. She's got plenty."

"I don't like it," Hart said again. "If it means there's goin' to be an attack—Nada's down there in that tent, I reckon—" He left the rest of it unsaid, and his face went taut.

CHAPTER IV

Gun Guests

THE sun dipped lower. In the reddish light, the advancing line of horsemen could be seen to halt. There were easily a hundred of them. They dismounted, left their horses standing, and came on afoot. All wore high sombreros, and the long steel barrels of carbines glinted here and there. They advanced steadily upon the long hill-range on the western side of the valley.

The sun sank out of sight, leaving murky gloom behind, and the stalking shapes were blotted from sight. The two men on the ledge stared down into the valley. Campfires were springing up, the flames casting a flickering light on men who squatted around them, cooking the evening meal. There was no suspicion of danger down there. Devlin rose to his feet, his hard face impassive.

"What're you goin' to do?" Hart asked quickly.

The notorious gunfighter shrugged, and nodded down the slope. Hart understood. There was only one thing to do. The camp must be warned of the impending attack. It was either that or watch a massacre. And Nada Parramore was down there. Even if she escaped the slaughter, it would probably mean a change of captors for her. *La Lagartija,* merciless as she could be, did not make a practice of harming prisoners. Other *bandidos* were not so scrupulous, especially where a beautiful gringo girl was concerned.

"I'm going with you," said Hart.

They got their horses, and led them down the steep slope. The sharp-eared renegades heard them at once. Faces lifted in the light of the campfires, and black eyes glittered. Gun-barrels flashed dull blue, and bolts clicked.

"All right, *hombres,*" drawled Devlin. "Take it easy!"

Some of the *bandidos* jerked at sound of that deep, harsh voice. They

recognized the calm, controlled tones. Staring with narrowed eyes, they saw the two approaching figures coming through the darkness. At sight of the tall, black-clad one, they muttered uneasily and stiffened their trigger-fingers. They knew *Don Predicador*—knew him all too well. There were those among them who considered him not quite human. He had the evil eye, and the Devil was in him.

Devlin halted beside a campfire, and ran his arctic eyes over the swarthy faces that shone ruddily in the firelight. "Tell your *jefa* we're here," he ordered tersely.

"It is not necessary, *amigo,*" murmured a soft voice. "I come at once to meet such welcome guests."

La Lagartija stepped into the firelight. In the mellow glow of the flames, she looked extraordinarily beautiful. Vivid, exotic, as gracefully poised as a young doe, she was the incarnation of sultry allure. Her brilliant eyes shone like golden stars as she regarded the tall gringo gunhawk and his companion.

"My poor camp is honored," she breathed. "Is it that you come so promptly to return my call? Such courtesy, *largo amigo!* But always you were gallant, *Don Predicador*—though I, alas, found myself too often the pursuer." Her sparkling eyes mockingly reproached the gunmaster. "Can it be that a change has—"

"Where's Miss Parramore?" Hart cut in sharply.

La Lagartija surveyed the young Texan, and her woman's eyes saw much. "So!" she said softly. "Here is one who rides on the wings of love, yes? I have sympathy for lovers. So foolish are they, and so amusingly earnest! Ho, Lazaro—go to my tent and inform the *Senorita* Parramore that I desire her presence here."

"You're growing careless, Conchita," remarked Devlin casually. "You forgot to post guards around the camp."

"Guards?" echoed the *bandido jefa.* She shrugged. "Why should I post guards? Surely not to warn me of the approach of—er—friends such as yourself, who come in peace and amity?"

"No," said the gunhawk. "Of enemies."

LAZARO came stalking through the ruddy gloom, escorting Neda Parramore. The girl gave a glad little cry at sight of Hart, and ran to him. The young Texan put his strong arms about her.

"Did—did she hurt you in any way, Nada?" he asked quickly.

Nada shook her head. "No," she answered. "She has been really kind, as though I were her guest. She is a strange woman, Hart. She rules these savage outlaws as if they were children."

La Lagartija glanced at Devlin with a demure smile. "Are they not charming fools?" she said softly. "Do they not arouse a tiny spark of envy in—ah—colder hearts? But you spoke of enemies. Do you, then, come as an enemy, *querido*—as you have done all too often? Must it be war between us again? That girl—what can she mean to you?"

"Ten thousand dollars!" murmured Devlin absently, gazing up the western slope of the valley, where its jagged edge cut against the night sky.

La Lagartija laughed, and nodded quick understanding. "I see!" she observed. "So you and I, *amigo,* are again two rival dogs of war—glaring at each other over the same bone! May the best dog win, *Don Predicador!*"

"We'll neither of us win," remarked Devlin mildly, "if we don't do something soon about that bunch that's shinning up the other side o' the hill, there!"

La Lagartija wheeled to follow his glance. "What?" she cried swiftly. "You mean we are being ambushed?"

"I reckon," said the gunhawk laconically. "Saw 'em from the top o'

the east bank awhile ago. They're the enemies I mentioned."

"And you came to warn me!" breathed *La Lagartija,* and her glance was a caress. "You came to save me from—" Her eyes went to Nada Parramore, and her glance hardened, became cynical. "You came to save me—and to save ten thousand dollars!" she ended, a trace of mocking bitterness in her musical voice.

She laughed again, with a brittle note. Laughter was her shield against those things that her savage fighters could not combat.

She called out rapid commands, terse and efficient. "Lazaro—*hombres—guardarse!* We have other visitors—visitors who creep up on us from the western bank! Forward, and make no sound. We will meet them, and exchange compliments!"

Her villainous *paisanos* stared at her, at Devlin, then grabbed up their weapons. Sudden alarms were nothing new to them. They lived always on the edge of death, and knew danger too well to be panicked by its abrupt appearance. They melted into the darkness like soft-padding wolves, each anxious to be the first to reach the crest of the hill.

ALL but a handful. A dozen pairs of eyes gleamed watchfully in the darkness. *La Lagartija* looked at Nada, at Hart, and finally at Devlin.

"I do not advise," she purred silkily, "that you take this opportunity to leave my camp. I would feel keenly the slight to my hospitality! So would my good *duradoes.* Their resentment would take the form of action. I may add that they are good shots—and your dress, *Senorita* Parramore, is of conveniently light color. Death loves a shining mark!"

She smiled sweetly upon them. "So let me press you to stay," she urged politely, "while I help my men attend to this other matter. These dozen *hombres*—you see them? Such shy fellows—they keep out of the firelight! They will—ah—attend you in my absence. No—no, do not thank me! You will stay, yes?"

"Who could refuse you?" murmured Devlin, and gravely bowed with a casual ease that bespoke a one-time familiarity with culture and good breeding. He offered his arm. "I claim the honor of escorting my charming hostess to the—reception," he drawled.

La Lagartija swept the tall gun devil a deep curtsey that was the epitome of pure grace. Her topaz eyes danced as she rested her slim fingertips on the proffered arm. "*Gracias,*" she thanked him lightly. "Fortunate am I in having such gracious guests."

They moved off out of the firelight, calm and debonair, not a sign showing of the clashing battle of wits between them.

Hart and Nada stood side by side, and watched them depart to join in the coming fight—a master lobo and a beautiful tigress, both after the same prize, each scheming with craft and smooth guile to outwit the other; and both equally ready to join forces against a common foe.

The Texan flung a look about him, and swore softly under his breath. There was not a chance of escape. Alone, he might have tried it. With the girl, in her light dress, it was suicide. Those hard-faced desperadoes would snap up their weapons and shoot at the first false move. They looked as though they were only too willing to do it.

Devlin and *La Lagartija* went together up the rough face of the rocky slope. The girl needed no aid in climbing it. She was as lithe and surefooted as a cat. They joined her followers, crouching silent as ghosts at the top of the long crest.

Old Lazaro came slinking through the rocks. "They step softly, these ones, and very carefully," he whispered hoarsely, and gave a grim chuckle. "Slowly they climb—oh, so slowly! But faster will they tumble

down again, when they taste our welcome, *mi jefa!* Your warning, *Don Predicador,* came none too soon. Without it, we might have been wiped out. They are now but fifty yards away."

"When they are half that distance," instructed *La Lagartija* crisply, "you may open fire. Who are they, I wonder?"

"Carrion!" spat her veteran *segundo,* and let it go at that. He was not interested in identities. It was enough that the oncoming prowlers were enemies, and that there was going to be a fight. He slipped off into the darkness, crooning softly under his breath with happy anticipation.

For a few more minutes there was silence. Then the savage snarl of Lazaro ripped out, giving the command to fire.

"Tirar!"

The next instant the night rocked with crashing sound, as carbines and six-guns flamed to life. Above the racket sounded startled yells and the wailing shrieks of mortally wounded men. It was not a battle, but a slaughter—a bloody massacre that had back-fired into the faces of the creeping ambushers.

Dark shapes leaped up, screaming imprecations, and went bounding down the rocky slope, fleeing in blind panic. Behind them, laughing with demoniacal glee, the wolves of *La Lagartija* hastened their fear-ridden flight with blast after blast of withering gunfire.

DEVLIN shook empty shells from his smoking guns, and slipped in fresh ones. At his side, *La Lagartija* reloaded her silver-mounted weapons and pushed them into her holsters. She lighted a slender, gold-tipped cigarette. The flame of the match showed her beautiful face flushed. Her tawny eyes sparkled.

"It is good to fight side by side once more, yes?" she observed serenely. "Like old times—before we both sought the same gold. Gold—it is a poisoned thorn that festers the clean flesh, yes?"

"I'll be glad to pull it out for you," murmured Devlin blandly, flipping his long-barrelled guns under his black coat.

She flashed him a smile of mock gratitude. "Always you are of the generous and obliging heart, *amigo mia!*" she responded courteously. "But my conscience forbids that I trespass upon the kindness of such an agreeable guest. I must refuse such—ah, Lazaro! What have you there, old wolf?"

Lazaro, looming up beside them, dumped a limp body on the ground and turned it unceremoniously over with his foot. He struck a match and held it close over the dead man's face.

"You know this carrion, *mi jefa?*" he growled. "It is Chico Garza—remember him? He rode with that overgrown animal they called *El Elefante.*"

La Lagartija nodded. "So, then, it was *El Elefante* and his creatures who came to call in the night, yes?" she remarked thoughtfully. "Strange, h'm? *El Elefante* is no friend of ours, but neither are many others. Why should that strutting animal attack us? There is more in this than petty jealousy, Lazaro, eh?"

The old border raider nodded, staring down at the dead face. *"Si,"* he grunted. "Much more. When such carrion dare to attack us, their courage has been bolstered by more than hate and envy! *Ai buen"*—he shrugged and dismissed the matter—"the Elephant lost half his jackals tonight! That should teach him better wisdom! The slope is littered with their low-born carcasses!"

"The buzzards will be grateful!" murmured his *jefa.* "Call the men back to camp, and let them sleep. Post guards on all sides. Pass the word, too, that our guests will stay. They are to be watched with close regard for their welfare and security. Especially their security, Lazaro!"

"Your hospitality, Conchita," murmured Devlin, "is almost overwhelming. Almost."

"I shall strive to make it so, *amigo!*" replied *La Lagartija*, and her eyes gleamed like yellow fire.

CHAPTER V

Gold Bait

IT was breaking dawn when a watchful sentry let out a shout and roused the camp. He was standing at the top of the east bank, pointing at the desert beyond. "An *hombre* comes —alone—bearing a white flag!" he called down, and lifted his carbine. "Shall I give him welcome?"

"*Cabron!*" bellowed Lazaro. "Would you fire on a flag of truce?"

"*Si!*" answered the renegade unashamedly, and grinned. "To me a white rag is a white rag, until it is stained with blood. Then it's red!"

"This one will stay white, *hombre!*" commanded Lazaro. "At least, it will until we learn what its bearer has to say. Let him come, fool!"

A few minutes later a horseman came up over the hill and led his mount down into the valley, under the unfriendly eye of the sentry. He was a halfbreed, dressed in the stained and patched clothes of a mine laborer. He looked nervously at the stony faces turned toward him. Lazaro curtly motioned him on to the black tent.

La Lagartija came out, stretching with the luxurious grace of a sinuous cat, and gazed sleepily at the man. "And whose animal," she inquired pleasantly, "might you be?"

"I am Pedro Martinez," mumbled the halfbreed, halting before her. "I work in the King Fortune mine, *Senorita*, in Borderline. *Senor* Parramore sent me to find you, with a message."

"And how did you find me?" asked *La Lagartija*. "Mine-workers are not usually good trackers."

"I was not always a mine-worker," answered Pedro Martinez. "I used to hunt the wild horse, when a boy. *Senor* Parramore knew of that, and knew that I am a good tracker. So he picked me to bring this message, *Senorita*. He offers ransom for his daughter. *Senor* Gowert waits with the money at a certain place."

"Most accommodating, these *gringos!*" approved the *bandida jefa*. "It is a pleasure to do business with them. This *Senor* Gowert—how much money is he burdened with?"

"Ten thousand *pesos*, in gold," said the halfbreed glibly. "You are to bring the *Senorita* Parramore, and collect the ransom. I am to guide you to the place where *Senor* Gowert waits. You are not to bring more than six of your men as escort, *Senorita*. The *gringos* fear treachery."

Devlin, standing nearby with Hart and Nada, nudged the tall young Texan. "D'you know that feller?" he muttered, his cold eyes narrowed a trifle.

Hart shook his head. "I've been tryin' to place him," he answered slowly. "Can't, though. Don't remember ever seeing him around the mine."

Devlin strolled over to *La Lagartija*. "Better check up on this *hombre*," he murmured. "He doesn't shape up like a miner to me, spite of his clothes. Ramage doesn't know him. Might be a trap. Watch your step!"

"Then you do not advise that I follow his message?" asked *La Lagartija* innocently. "You think I should ignore it? You fear for my safety?"

"Well — something like that," grunted the big gunfighter.

The golden eyes went wide and alluring. "Such heart-warming solicitude!" breathed the girl. "And your anxiety is all for me, of course? Ah, it is base of me to question your motives, *querido!* They are as pure as the driven snow—as pure as they always are! But life holds so many disillusionments for a weak woman, it is hard to keep the heart free from a trace of cynical wonder."

SHE leaned closer to the tall, notorious gunhawk, her studied pose that of appealing supplication. "For-

give me, *Don Predicador,*" she murmured. "But is it that you are troubled by a certain matter of ten thousand dollars? That you see it slipping through your fingers? Ah, no, it cannot be! Say that it is I, and not the loss of gold, that arouses your grave fears, and let my trusting heart be comforted!"

Devlin shrugged, with a trace of anger. "Please yourself," he growled, and turned away.

"Thank you, I shall do so," said *La Lagartija,* her white teeth flashing in a charming smile. "It will please me to go with this *hombre,* and exchange *Senorita* Parramore for ten thousand dollars! Lazaro, pick six men to ride with us. You will take charge here during my absence, and continue to pay very close attention to our guests."

In fifteen minutes she was mounted on her big cream stallion, Nada Parramore beside her on a small roan. Behind the two girls sat half a dozen picked fighters, armed to the teeth, mounted on fine horses that had once belonged to less predatory owners. Pedro Martinez took his place at the front, as guide, and nodded his head.

"*Adelante!*" commanded *La Lagartija,* and the little party started forward. She looked back at Devlin as she rode off. "When I return, *amigo,*" she called sweetly, "I shall ask your help in counting all that gold! *Adios!*"

The gunmaster's hard mouth quirked in a faint grin, and a glint of appreciative humor shone in his opaque gray eyes. "*Adios,*" he returned curtly, and watched the party ride out of the valley.

Hart looked about him at the watchful *bandidos,* and at the tall gray hill-banks on both sides of the valley. He absently tapped his holster. *La Lagartija,* with her mockingly scrupulous courtesy, had made no attempt to disarm her involuntary guests. Such crudeness would have offended her sense of etiquette. Her methods were more subtle. Some morning her guests would awake from a drugged sleep to find their guns gone, and she would be politely regretful.

But guns were of little use, anyway, with a hundred vigilant trigger-sharks keeping close watch. And to make a break meant certain death. A hundred carbines would cut them to ribbons before they could begin to climb the hills out of the valley.

"Tight as a jail!" muttered the Texan.

"This valley," observed Devlin reflectively, "was likely a river-bed once, 'bout a thousand years ago. Looks like it."

Hart turned, met the gun devil's inscrutable eyes, and understood the significance of that casual remark. If the valley was a long-dry arroyo, it had to have outlets somewhere along its winding course. The nearest bend was some five hundred yards away to the south. The Texan glanced that way. Five hundred yards. He shook his head, with a tight grimace.

"They've got our horses," he muttered. "Say, Devlin, did you ever see the Mexes play that 'pull-the-chicken' game? They bury a chicken in the sand, with just its head stickin' out. Then they ride hell-bent for it, an' grab for the head as they go by. Well, I feel like the chicken!"

Devlin grinned slightly. For a moment he was silent, then little cold sparks of devilish mischief began to glimmer in his sardonic eyes. "I've seen 'em do the same trick with a coin," he said, and stared with stony hostility at the young Texan. "Give me an argument on that, you mouthy young cub!"

A MINUTE later every *bandido* in camp was straining ears to catch the drift of an argument that had suddenly flared up between the two gringos. With the Mexican love of a good rousing battle of words and invective, they edged closer to listen. Soon the two *gringos* were ringed about by a deeply interested crowd of spectators, nodding appreciation at

each telling thrust or choice bit of poetic profanity.

Lazaro pushed his way to the front rank, frowning suspiciously. He didn't trust Devlin. Too often had he and his *jefa* been tricked by the big *gringo diablo,* just when they thought they had him, not to be darkly wary of his every action. But soon he, too, was a rapt listener. *Ai*—these *gringos* were masters in the art of profane invention! Their words cut like keen-edged knives.

"Young feller," said Devlin, his harsh drawl dripping cold sarcasm. "you mistake your half-pint of knowledge for an ocean! When bigger, mouthier, more benightedly blind fools than you are made, Texas will prob'ly have a hand in makin' 'em! Up till then, you remain its prize specimen!"

The swarthy listeners chuckled, and nudged each other.

Hart's eyes flickered angrily. "Where I come from," he snapped, "they figger your kind o' big talk is on par with hog-calling!"

Devlin gave a thin, satanic smile. "Then," he purred, "I'm certainly suiting my conversation to my company!"

A delighted roar of laughter went up from the *bandidos.* This black-garbed *hijo de infierno*—his words were as deadly as his guns!

Old Lazaro wiped tears from his eyes with the edge of his rough sleeve. "*Don Predicador*—have mercy on a beaten foe!" he chortled. "In what manner did this rash one arouse your barbed words?"

"The fool judges all other men by his own small measure," drawled Devlin. "He's a rotten horseman, so he thinks—"

"Hell, I was raised on a horse!" Hart cut in wrathfully. "But I still claim no man can pick up a coin from the ground while riding at top speed. Anybody who says he can is just shootin' off his mouth!"

A murmur went through the crowd. Devlin shrugged. "What d'you think o' that, *hombres?*" he asked. "Aren't there any good 'pull-the-chicken' riders among you who can give him the lie? Why, I can do it myself, with a good horse."

"And I!" called out a score of eager voices.

"Prove it!" barked Hart scornfully.

Lazaro shook his head, his black eyes cunning. "Not by you, *Don Predicador,* will it be proved!" he growled. "Already I am well convinced of your excellent horsemanship!"

THE gunmaster did not show a sign of disappointment. He shrugged unconcernedly. "I'll look on, then," he answered. "And I'll put up the coin." He pulled a fistful of gold-pieces from his pocket. "Here's the prize, *hombres.* I'll put up two at a time an' you can ride for 'em in pairs. Those who get 'em, keep 'em. *Bueno?*"

"*Bueno!*" shouted the mob. Any pastime which involved riding—and a chance at winning a gold-piece—drew forth their hearty support.

"All right," said Devlin. "Saddle up an' show this one-time cow nurse some real ridin'!"

The *bandidos,* chattering and laughing like excited children, dashed off to saddle up their best horses. They would show this Texas *gringo* how horses should be ridden. And they would show *Don Predicador,* who knew good riders when he saw them, that his faith in Mexican horsemanship was not misplaced. They would also take great pleasure in winning his gold. An excellent way of spending an otherwise uneventful day.

Devlin walked off down the valley, jingling the coins in his hand. Hart, looking obstinate and ruffled, walked after him. Lazaro followed, his horny hands resting on his gun-butts. He was taking no chances. A couple of hundred yards along the valley, Devlin halted.

"Reckon this'll be far enough," he remarked. "They ought to be able to

get up some speed on a long flat stretch like this, eh, Lazaro?" He placed two of his gold coins on the ground, a few feet apart, and moved off to one side.

Lazaro nodded agreement. He looked back at the men, each racing to be the first to saddle up, a wistful gleam in his squinted eyes. He would have liked to enter the impromptu contest, himself, and show off his skill. But he had his position to think of. He was *segundo* to the great and noble *La Lagartija,* and temporarily in command of the pack. Such goings-on were beneath his dignity.

Hart moved away from the big gunfighter, walked past the dropped coins, and squatted on his heels a few yards beyond. He looked at the busy renegades, and snorted his disbelief of their vaunted prowess.

Two of the outlaws finished saddling their mounts, vaulted into their high-cantled rigs, and set spur with exultant yippees. As they rode off, the rest of the horde paused to stand and watch with expertly critical eyes. There were unwritten rules to these "pull-the-chicken" contests. The rider who sacrificed form and swagger for the sake of winning, won only disgust.

On came the two riders, neck and neck, lashing their horses to top speed, rising and falling with the gait to lighten the burden, and flinging boasts at each other. When they had covered half the distance and got their mounts settled down to a mad gallop, they rose up in their saddles to get a sight of the coins. One of them let out a yell, and pointed. The other nodded, grinning, and spat a friendly insult.

CHAPTER VI

Domain of Madness

LAZARO'S eyes gleamed as his gamester blood leaped to the sight of the splendid racing animals. Devlin shot a glance at Hart. The Texan rose to his feet. Shouts of approval and encouragement came from the watching crowd at the other end of the improvised course.

Twenty yards from the coins, the two riders swerved apart. With their eyes fixed on the two shining gold disks, they slid almost out of their saddles and bent over with the easy, catlike motion peculiar to Latins and fine horsemen.

Two arms stretched out. Two brown hands skimmed over the sand and darted at the coins. One hand fumbled and missed, the gold-piece slipping through the fingers. The other scooped accurately, barely disturbing the sand.

Devlin suddenly moved. His left fist flashed, and Lazaro went sprawling. In the same smooth motion, he leaped like a panther at the nearest horse. Hart jumped for the other at the same time. It was perfect team work.

The two *bandidos,* barely starting their upward swing from their low-leaning crouch, got the surprise of their lives. One, the reins snatched from his grasp, overbalanced. Instinct made him dig spur in a frantic effort to keep his seat. A hand grabbed his leg and threw it over. With an astonished grunt, he stood on his head for an instant before landing on his back with a thump that knocked all the wind out of him.

The other's evacuation was more abrupt. A booted foot landed hard on the seat of his pants, and sent him clean out of the saddle in a headlong dive. His howl of amazed rage ended in a muffled splutter as he got a mouthful of sand.

Lazaro got dazedly to his feet, rubbing his bruised jaw. He stared bewilderedly at the two unseated horsemen, picking themselves up out of the dust. Angry yells were sounding from the horde of outlaws, and they were vaulting into their saddles. The old hard-case turned his head and caught sight of two horsemen, riding like mad, just vanishing around the first bend of the valley.

"Por Dios!" he mumbled. "But how—?"

One of the unseated contest-riders dug sand out of his ear and uttered a string of sizzling oaths. "Horsemanship!" he spat. "That black *diablo!* That *gringo* son of hell! That—pah!"

The other said nothing. He was too busy spitting sand.

Devlin flung a backward glance behind him as he swung around the bend. He gave a low chuckle, and heeled his plunging mount to keep it at top stride.

Hart echoed the gunhawk's chuckle. "They're good horsemen, all right," he called out. "These are good horses, too!"

"They better be!" grunted Devlin. "That whole trigger-itchy pack'll be doggin' our trail from now on!"

He was right. Around the bend a moment later swept a mob of pursuing riders, howling threats and curses as they flogged their straining mounts. Crazed with fury at the *gringos'* trick, fearing the wrath of *La Lagartija* for allowing her prisoner-guests to outwit them, they rode with the reckless abandon of madmen.

THE valley began to widen out and grow shallow. As the hills flashed by, Devlin kept his eye out for an opening. He suddenly swung his rocketing horse half around, almost spilling it, and his right stirrup dipped sand as he made for a cleft in the rock. Hart, streaking past, had to swing his mount full around to follow him, and a bullet sang by him as he gained the cleft.

The two gringos sent their mounts clattering up the narrow gorge, sliding and plunging on a treacherous floor of loose stones and bits of rock. The cleft wound back and forth, and finally opened out onto a slanted stretch of hill-side that dipped down to the desert. To the right was a sea of sand, rolling out for miles to the flat horizon. To the left were the ragged outlines of *Los Muertos Collados* —the Dead Hills.

Hoofs pounded and rattled in the cleft, as the raging *bandidos* took to it in full cry after their quarry. Devlin tugged on the left rein. "We'll make for the hills," he called. "Mebbe we can shake off these yowling critters there."

They went tearing down the slant, hit the sandy desert floor, and veered across its edge for *Los Muertos Collados.* A series of shrill yells rang out behind them as their pursuers came pouring out of the cleft and sighted them. When the fugitives reached the hills, the renegade pack was less than a quarter-mile behind them, and coming fast.

Hart Ramage learned things then about mazing a trail and throwing off pursuit. The renegades, themselves past-masters in the art, were not easily fooled. To outwit their trail sense, a trick had to be double-barrelled, played with careful cunning, and timed to a hair.

Devlin, impassively efficient, calmly pulled owl-hoot tricks of bluff and guile that sometimes seemed to the Texan sheer crazy daring. More than once the renegades galloped by within ten yards of their hidden quarry. It was a grim game of hide-and-seek, with death for the losers.

The sun was standing at high noon when Devlin signalled for a halt. The two men sat and listened, while their sweat-covered horses gratefully caught their wind. From afar off came a drumming of hoofbeats that gradually died away.

"We've shaken 'em off," said Hart relievedly, and wiped the dust and sweat from his face. "Of all the persistent cusses! What now, Devlin? Do we pick up *La Lagartija's* trail? The more I think about that Pedro Martinez spic, the more leery I get. If anything's happened—gosh, let's hurry!"

Devlin nodded, and heeled his mount. It was two hours before they picked up the trail of *La Lagartija*

and her party. It led straight north over the flat desert, toward the broken country of the border badlands. They followed it, keeping their horses to a swinging lope.

At the ragged edge of the chopped-up badlands, where the rolling desert fetched up short against jumbled peaks of rimrock, the trail turned sharply toward the west. The country here was a maze of sandstone buttes, gaunt rock-hills, and hogbacks of drifted sand. Here and there a giant cactus reared its spiky arms up against the shining sky, and patches of stunted mesquite struggled for life in the grudging soil.

The two men followed the trail. It turned again, toward a long ridge, dotted at one end by a single high butte. Devlin, his piercing eyes squinted against the glaring sun, muttered an oath and urged his tired mount to greater speed. Hart, catching up, choked on a sudden exclamation and his tanned face went ashen.

LYING fifty yards from the foot of the butte were half a dozen motionless figures huddled on the sand. The two *gringos* drew up among them. Devlin's hawklike face was inscrutable as granite, his hard eyes blank and expressionless. He scanned the sprawled bodies.

"*La Lagartija's* men!" he muttered harshly. "Yeah—it was a trap. They got wiped out!"

He studied the bodies. One of them had a bullet-hole almost in the top of the head. He had been shot from up above. The somber-garbed gunmaster lifted his glance to the butte. It was from there that the hidden ambushers had sent their murderous fire, high up on the butte. From there, they had been able to sight the victims from far off. It had been planned murder. Pedro Martinez had led his victims to the place of slaughter, and—

Devlin suddenly leaped backward out of the saddle, snatching the butt of his saddle-gun and dragging it from its long scabbard as he cleared the cantle. He snapped a warning, and whipped the rifle to his shoulder as he hit the ground.

High up on the butte, three puffs of smoke spurted from three glints of metal. They came from behind a finger of rock, almost at the top of the high pinnacle. Three flat reports cracked out in the still air. Three distinct smacks sounded.

Devlin's horse gave an almost human sigh, dropped to its knees, and rolled over. Hart gasped, clutched at his left shoulder, and went down with his stricken horse.

With the third report, Devlin's heavy-calibre rifle roared. A metallic object flashed in the sun as it fell end over end down the steep face of the butte. It was followed by another object, arms and legs whirling grotesquely as it dropped.

Another puff of gun-smoke came from the butte, and again Devlin's rifle roared an answer. A bullet screeched past the gunhawk's ears and kicked up a spurt of sand behind him. He began striding toward the butte, his narrowed eyes baleful and sinister as those of a wary wolf. The mood of the killer was upon him. He fired again.

A HIGH-CROWNED sombrero sailed through the air. An arm snaked out from behind the finger of rock, grabbing at it. Devlin fired in a flash. A scream sounded. The ambusher, hit in the arm and knocked half around by the impact of the heavy slug, stumbled partly into sight.

Devlin triggered his rifle once more. He did not watch the figure as it swayed out and came plunging down to the desert floor. His eyes, icy and merciless, were fixed on the rock finger. There was still one ambusher left up there. He kept his sights lined upon it and walked on, slowly, deliberately, with the soft stride of a tiger stalking its chosen prey.

A glint showed, vanished again. The last man had lost his nerve. Devlin waited. He lowered his rifle. Hold-

ing it carelessly in one hand, he shaded his eyes and peered off toward the right.

Immediately the flash of gun-metal reappeared, and something dark behind it. Devlin's rifle flicked up, spat once, twice. The gun devil lowered it, and walked on to the butte. He was not interested in men now; he was interested in finding horses. A body thudded to the ground, bounced, and lay still. He strode around the butte.

There were no horses behind it. In the sheer face of the butte were footholds, cut into the sandstone. This place was a favorite ambush spot, evidently. It had been used as such before. Victims were lured to it, then cut down by hidden men posted above.

But no horses. The gunhawk made a search. He climbed part way up the butte and scanned the surrounding territory. When he descended he was swearing softly. The three marksmen had evidently been left here by their *jefe* to watch the back trail. And to insure their remaining on guard, their horses had been taken from them, leaving them stranded at their post until it pleased their *jefe* to send back for them.

HART was sitting up, braced against his dead horse, when Devlin rejoined him. With a strip of his shirt he was trying to stem the blood that flowed from his bullet-torn shoulder. He looked up and managed a mirthless grin.

"Cute little trap, huh?" he mumbled. "Wonder where those *hombres* left their horses?"

"They didn't leave 'em anywhere," said Devlin.

They looked at each other. "You mean—we're afoot?" asked Hart. "No horses! And Nada— We've got to do something, Devlin! Got to! We can't just stay here an'—an die while she's— They got Nada—"

"Don't bog your head, feller!" growled Devlin. "Yeah, they got Nada. Got *La Lagartija*, too. *El Elefante*, I reckon. That Martinez spic was likely one o' his gang. There's a trail back o' that butte, made by a big bunch o' riders. It goes toward the southwest. I'm goin' to follow it—"

"On foot?" Hart struggled up, stood swaying dizzily. "I'm goin' too!"

Devlin shrugged. He turned without a word and strode off. Half an hour later, following a churned-up trail, he looked back over the waterless stretches of salt flats and drifted ripples of alkali dust.

Hart Ramage was far behind, but still doggedly sticking to the trail. He was staggering along with bowed head, clasping his wounded shoulder. The gun devil scanned him briefly, gave him ten more minutes to last out. The blazing sun, loss of blood, burning thirst, all added up to an inexorable total—fever. Then delirium, oblivion, and death.

Devlin stalked on. Too bad, but there was nothing he could do for the young Texan. To help him meant delay. Pity had no place in this grim race. This trail led to two women who were prisoners, doomed to a bottomless hell, at the mercy of a *bandido* noted for his fondness for cruelty. There was a chance of saving them—or at least of bringing clean death to them before it was too late.

It was a dim chance. The wasteland hell-bottoms, malevolent in their inanimate barrenness, were haunted by death, slow and lingering. On foot, without water, a man was practically beaten from the start. It would be mile after mile of heat-shimmering hell, deserted by even the buzzards. And at the end of the trail, a pack of killers. One man against the desert—and fifty human wolves.

Devlin strode on, steadily, untiringly, his hard face dour and impassive, his flinty eyes cold and opaque. When next he looked back, Hart Ramage was lying face down in the dust, far behind. A peal of crazy laughter floated over the empty badlands. Delirium.

Devlin trudged on.

CHAPTER VII

Lair of the Lobo

DOWN in *Sagradamente Valle,* a green oasis on the edge of the Mexican desert, stood the big adobe buildings of *Solitario Rancho.* The thick walls were pock-marked with bullet holes. *El Elefante* and his band of marauding killers had made those holes. They had also made holes in the orginal owners of the rancho, who had tried hopelessly to defend it.

Here it was that *El Elefante,* between pillaging raids, lived the life of a rich *haciendado,* secure in the strength of his well-armed followers. It had become his fortified headquarters. Here it was that he brought his plunder.

Today he had brought fresh plunder to his captured *hacienda.* Two women, young, very beautiful. One was a *gringo muchacha,* heiress to a fortune. The other was a notorious *bandida,* a clever she-devil about whom *El Elefante* had often entertained much thought and many wishful speculations.

There were lights shining from the *hacienda.* From the long adobe building behind it, once the living quarters of *vaqueros,* but now the lair of bloody-handed renegades, issued loud talk and the constant clink of bottles.

In a big, luxuriously furnished room of the *hacienda,* lolling at his ease in a leather chair, *El Elefante* studied under lowered eyelids the face of his long-time ally, Newt Gowert.

The bandit chief had not been misnamed the Elephant. He was big, ponderous, deceptively slow-moving. Everything about him looked heavy, solid. Even his eyes, dull and lifeless as ripe olives, moved with slow deliberation. His lips, thick and sensuous, hung lax on his massive face.

"So it must be death, eh?" he rumbled, the words seeming to come from deep down in his barrel chest. "Death for the so-beautiful *gringo muchacha!* A pity, Gowert *amigo!*"

"It's what I'm paying you for," Gowert snapped nervously. "I put old Parramore out of the way. Now it's—it's her turn! With both of 'em dead, the King Fortune belongs to me, *sabe?*"

"I *sabe,*" nodded *El Elefante.* "But you have not yet paid me for this thing."

"It's right here." Gowert kicked the saddle-bag that lay at his feet. "Five thousand in gold coin. Yours when you finish the job."

"Mine," agreed the *bandido,* letting his eyes rest on the bag. "But when this thing is finished, and you own the King Fortune, what then? No longer will you wish to send word to me of silver shipments, so that I may rob them and share the loot with you, eh?" He wagged his huge head. "I see much profit for you in the *muchacha's* death—but little for me!"

"Five thousand—" began Gowert.

"Is too little!" *El Elefante* finished for him.

At the far end of the room Nada Parramore, bound to a heavy chair, stared with incredulous horror at the two men. So shocked by news of her father's murder was she that she hardly realized that they were bargaining for her death—haggling over the price—as though she were an animal destined for the slaughter-pen.

Beside her, also bound to a chair, *La Lagartija* relaxed as comfortably as her bonds would permit, and listened with interest to the conversation. There was no fear on her vividly beautiful face. Her brilliant eyes were calm, with a hint of amusement in their golden depths. She could read the thoughts of the big *bandido* chief, and guessed what was coming.

"So five thousand isn't enough, eh?" Gowert muttered, trying to conceal his blazing anger. "You've got *La Lagartija*—she'll pay you—"

"Nothing!" purred *El Elefante.* "There is no ransom nor bounty big enough to buy her! She stays here! I shall add her to my other valuable possessions!"

He gazed down the room into a pair of glowing eyes that were full of mocking scorn. They met his own dull black ones in a level glance which he was the first to break. "She has a high spirit," he murmured, and the shadow of a cruel smile flitted over his dark face. "It will give me much pleasure to break it!"

Gowert shivered a little at the calm malignance in the bandit's slow voice. "Well," he asked sullenly, "how much do I have to pay?"

"That will require thought," returned *El Elefante* blandly. "Perhaps the *Senorita* Parramore would pay me more for her freedom than you would for her death, yes? Perhaps I shall demand half of the King Fortune mine —from you, or from her!"

"What?" Gowert snapped angrily. "You'd doublecross me?"

"But of course!" coolly admitted the big Mexican. "It will take me several days to decide. You will stay here, *amigo,* and my men will look after you. I myself, will take personal care of the two *senoritas.* Such precious possessions must be well guarded!"

He got to his feet, hitched his gunbelts, and walked slowly toward the two captive girls. His gait was lumbering, but had a queerly noiseless quality. There was a faint sneer of contempt on his thick lips as he passed Gowert.

That sneer was the last straw. Gowert saw the King Fortune mine slipping from his blood-stained grasp, his careful plans wrecked, all his treacherous scheming gone for nothing. He lost his head. He whipped out a gun as the bandit chief passed him.

"Stick 'em up!" he spat, shaking with rage and fear. "Up with 'em—or I'll blast you to hell!"

El Elefante stopped short. A look of blank surprise passed over his face. He turned, raising his arms, and stared at the gringo. "You are mad, *amigo!*" he grunted. "If you shoot, my men will come and tear you to bits!"

"The hell with that!" grated Gowert. He was berserk. It was in his staring eyes, wide and bloodshot. A coward's desperate courage had turned him into a crazed and dangerous killer.

He sidled around the bandit and backed toward the two girls. His left hand fumbled under his shirt and came out with a knife. "She's gonna die!" he snarled hoarsely. "I'll do the job myself! Don't move, *Elefante,* or you go with her!"

He felt behind him as he backed, keeping his wild eyes on the *bandido jefe.* His hand, grasping the knife, touched Nada's shoulder as the girl tried to shrink away. With a crazy growl, he raised the knife and brought it down with all his strength.

BEHIND him, a shot roared out, and the slam of a door flung open. A piece of steel hit the floor with a sharp clang. Gowert drew a hiss of pain, and looked stupidly down at his left arm. It was gashed from elbow to wrist, and his knuckles were smashed out of shape by the bullet that had plowed along his forearm.

He stumbled around, sobbing with terror as he swung his gun, and got a momentary glimpse of a tall, black, dust-covered apparition with sinister gray eyes that were red-rimmed, unblinking, and cold as death. Then the gun roared again, and the satanic visage seemed to hang suspended above a thin curtain of blue smoke.

But Gowert didn't see that. He was lurching backward. His eyes were still open, but they saw nothing. He was dead before he hit the floor.

El Elefante dodged with surprising nimbleness as a third shot crashed out. He had nerve and cool wits. His guns came snapping out to his lightning draw, and boomed twice.

Devlin side-stepped, but the man-killing trek afoot across the badlands had sapped the springiness from his legs. Weariness clogged their muscular reaction. A red streak slashed his jaw. A tiny cloud of fine alkali dust

flicked from his ministerial coat. A twinge of sharp pain drew down the corners of his hard mouth in a devil's grimace. He triggered his brace of long-barrelled guns as *El Elefante* thumbed his hammers back for another double blast.

The big *bandido* seemed suddenly to turn to stone. He stood rigid, motionless, halted in mid-action. A horrified glare came into his black eyes. It sprang from the shocking knowledge of approaching death. His thumbs moved. Two clicks sounded as he completed the cocking of his weapons.

Devlin fired again, point-blank, without a sign of emotion on his haggard, hawklike face.

El Elefante jerked slightly. His eyes lost their glare, and became glazed. Very slowly, he toppled over, stiff as a statue, and crashed full length on the floor with a force that shook the building.

"And that," observed *La Lagartija* serenely, "is the reward of evil ambition! The good *padres* are right. Life is for the pure in heart. *El Elefante* dies. We live—but for how long, I wonder?"

Devlin kicked the door shut, and threw the heavy cross-bar into place. Voices were yelling excitedly around the *hacienda,* doors were slamming open, and running feet padded in the sand. The shots had brought *El Elefante's* horde on the run.

The tall gun devil doused the big oil lamp. Feeling his way to the two girls, he pulled out a short knife and cut their bonds. *La Lagartija's* eyes were shining like golden fire as he bent over her.

"How long do we live, *querido mia?*" she asked again. "An hour, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," muttered Devlin. His deep voice held a tired note.

"Ah, well," murmured *La Lagartija,* "an hour can mean much. To me this last hour will not be unhappy—for I shall be thinking that you followed that last long trail to save me, and not for gain of gold. Rather, to die with me, *querido*—for this is the end, yes?"

A loud hammering shook the door. Devlin stood still, his baleful eyes ranging over the windows. *La Lagartija* quietly stripped the guns and cartridge belts from Gowert and *El Elefante.* She handed two to Nada.

Voices outside called urgent queries. A head bobbed up at a window. For a moment it stayed there, while its owner peered into the darkness of the room. Then the fellow began climbing through.

DEVLIN stepped softly over and swung hard with a gun-barrel. There was a crack, and the man tumbled out of sight. At once a score of voices let out shrill yells of warning. Guns barked, their flashes spearing the outside gloom, and slugs whistled through the open windows.

The last hour had begun.

A rifle-barrel poked over a window sill and blazed twice before *La Lagartija* wiped it from sight with a single accurate shot. Other gun-barrels took its place. Heads bobbed up, eyes glaring, behind streaks of yellow flame.

Devlin pivoted on his heel, firing at the windows as he spun around. Half crouched, his head thrust slightly forward, he triggered shots with cold deadliness at every moving shape that flitted into view. *La Lagartija* slipped forward and took her place beside him, shooting and reloading with calm precision. Nada tipped over a table and fired over it at the door, which was shaking to a series of pounding blows from outside.

The room grew hazy with drifting gun-smoke, acrid and pungent. Bullets pinged and spattered into the walls, flaking off chunks of the dry adobe. The pounding on the door ceased, and splintered holes began to dot its wooden panels as some of the storming renegades concentrated a furious fire upon it.

Devlin dropped to one knee and dragged *La Lagartija* down with him. The gunfire was increasing to a mad

crescendo. The bandits, quick to sense the disadvantages of close-quarter fighting, had withdrawn from the windows and were shifting about in the darkness, emptying their weapons as fast as they could load them.

Their slugs, whining through the windows and the partly shattered door, swept the smoke-filled room in a criss-cross hail. A heavy blow crashed on the door, splitting it down the middle. The cross-bar, one socket torn out, hung askew. Another blow, and half the door caved in.

The besieged three blazed at the openings. A heavy weight crashed against what was left of the door. It fell in, exposing a mass of dark shapes beyond. With a chorus of snarling cries, the bunch made a rush.

CHAPTER VIII

Rope's End

DEVLIN'S heavy guns spat a roaring rat-a-tat into the thick of the onrushing mob. *La Lagartija* swung her weapons and joined their vicious spurting to the gunmaster's rapid fire. Nada gave a cry, and clipped her last three shots at a swarming pack of vengeful humanity that came clambering through the windows.

La Lagartija's gun-hammers clicked on empty shells. Devlin's guns ended their blasting song and grew mute. There was no time to reload. The foremost of the attacking gang were already in the room. More were pouring through the doorway, and climbing through the windows, yelling like fiends with the lust of blood and victory.

Devlin slashed with his long gun-barrels. His hellish eyes glaring coldly in the darkness, his giant frame reared up black and menacing, he struck savage blows that crushed bone and sinew and left broken men at each cutting stroke. He charged full tilt at the blocked doorway in a desperate attempt to clear a path of escape for the two girls.

Above the snarls and yells of the milling mob, suddenly sounded a swelling rumble. A solid burst of gunfire thundered out and seemed to shake the earth with its reverberating crash. Then a wild, many-voiced scream drowned out all other sound.

"La Lagartija!"

The shrieking crowd in and around the *hacienda* fell mute in shocked silence as the echoes of the piercing battle-cry mingled with the drumming of hoofs and rattle of heavy gunfire. Some of them crumpled. The realization of danger seemed to hit the rest all at once. With it came swift panic, as whining bits of lead thwacked among them, and massed horsemen loomed up in the night.

Then they were running in all directions, shooting blindly about them, in a scrambling rush to escape the death-dealing riders. They had tasted the vengeance of *La Lagartija's* fighters before, and knew better than to expect quarter. They got none.

Two figures showed up in the smashed doorway of the *hacienda,* and came stumbling through over the fallen bodies. One was Lazaro, growling deep in his throat like an angry dog, a smoking gun in each hand. The other was Hart Ramage, eyes fever-bright, his face drawn and ghastly pale, staggering like a drunken man.

Lazaro struck a match, lighted the big lamp with hands that trembled, and glared about him. His eyes fell on his *jefa,* and he roared out a full-bodied oath of glad relief.

Nada ran forward and caught Hart just as the young Texan's legs buckled under him. His weight bore the girl down. They both sat on the floor. Hysteria made them laugh—weak, trembly laughter that was close to tears. Then their lips met . . . .

La Lagartija, wiping blood from Devlin's face, smiled kindly at her scarred old *segundo.* "Such excellent care you take of my guests, Lazaro!" she murmured. *"Ai*—what a watchdog is my fine *segundo!"*

The old ruffian flushed darkly, and dropped his guilty eyes. "That *diablo —Don Predicador!*" he grumbled. "He cannot be held by heaven or hell, *mi jefa!* He tricked us, with his double-tongued talk of horsemanship!"

HE scowled at Devlin, but his black eyes were not entirely hostile. "I took the liberty of riding your horse, *Don Predicador,*" he said gruffly. "It is outside. We found your trail, after many false ones, up in *Los Muertos Collados,* and followed it to the butte—the butte of death! Then we came upon *Senor* Ramage, who lay as one dead. We revived him, and he told us what had happened."

"Perhaps it was as well," he observed caustically, "that your guests gave us that lesson in horsemanship! But for that, *mi jefa,* you would have remained yourself a guest—a guest of *El Elefante!* Instead of collecting ransom—"

"Still your tongue, old wolf!" commanded *La Lagartija* gently. "Ransom? No—no ransom. Nor shall there be. *Senorita* Parramore has stood with me on the brink of the Pit. There we learned that there are men who do not value gold as much as—but you would not understand, my Lazaro. You are not a woman."

"No—thank the saints—I am not a woman!" grunted the hard-bitten old warrior. "What now?" He squinted resignedly at his beautiful *jefa.*

"Tomorrow," said *La Lagartija,* "we escort *Senorita* Parramore and *Senor* Ramage back to the border, and speed them on their way with our blessings. No ransom. That is my order."

She looked at Devlin, her golden eyes soft yet subtly challenging. "But you, *amigo*—?" she murmured. "Is it true, I wonder, that neither heaven nor hell can hold you? Do I again bid you *'adios',* and watch you ride away —as you always do? Ah, no! Not this time, *querido!*"

She smiled. "You came into my camp to warn me of danger. You followed me here and saved me from torture—and worse! Why? You will stay, *Don Predicador*—and I shall learn the answer to that question!"

The somber-garbed gun devil made no reply. He sank wearily into a chair and brushed a hand across his tired, blood-smeared face. Then, with a sigh of fatigue, he let his head fall back and his eyes closed. He looked exhausted, played out, at the end of his rope.

La Lagartija motioned the others out of the room, with a slim finger to her ripe lips, and followed them. She paused on the threshold and looked back at the slumped body of the notorious *gringo* outlaw. Her brilliant eyes grew keen, possessive.

"Sleep, *querido!*" she breathed. "Sleep! The dogs of war have ceased their growling—and the best dog has won! Tomorrow you will know it—and you will begin to forget the word *'adios'!*" Her strange eyes triumphant, she left the silent gunfighter.

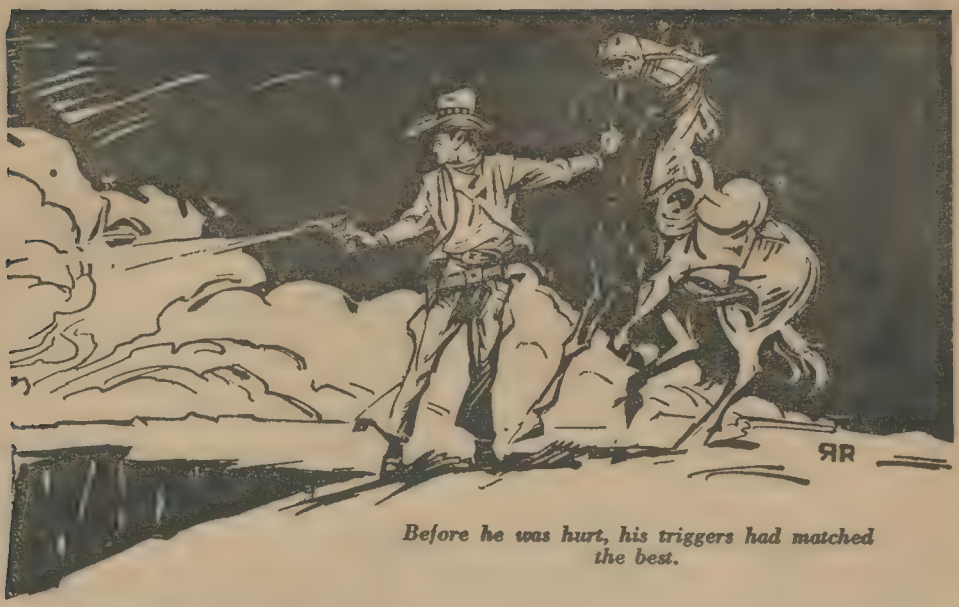
Ten minutes later, whispering orders to Lazaro, she wheeled sharply as the black shape of a horse and rider went cantering past.

"*Adios,* Conchita!" drawled a deep, tired voice.

La Lagartija drew a quick breath, and her hands dropped to her gun-butts. Her topaz eyes blazed. Then they softened. She shrugged, and gave a shaky little laugh. "*Adios, amigo!*" she called back. "*Vaya con dios*—till we meet again!"

Preacher Devlin patted the sleek neck of his black mount as he loped out of *Sagradamente Valle.* He looked back as he reached the crest of the ridge, and raised a hand in curt farewell. The flash of a white arm answered him. Some of the hardness drained out of his cold, cynical eyes.

He faced front again as his horse took the down slope in long plunging leaps, and adjusted the position of his right saddle-bag. Those five hard little leather sacks inside bumped uncomfortably against his knee.



Before he was hurt, his triggers had matched the best.

Star-Toter's Brand

By Joseph F. Hook

Author of "Desert Destiny," etc.

Sheriff Jim had to hand over his badge when an outlaw's slug crippled him for life. And he thought he'd rather die than never to follow owl-hoot tracks again. But he found a star-toter's brand of courage can buck all odds—except six-gun odds against paralyzed gun-hands.

THE task Doc Chesney had dreaded was at last finished. The terrific strain he had undergone showed in the white knuckles of hands that gripped the rail at the foot of Sheriff Jim Mason's cot in the wing of the doctor's house that served as Sun Dog's hospital.

"So that's it, huh, Doc?" Sheriff Jim Scott said quietly. "From the neck up and from the waist down I'm alive, but from the neck to the waist I'm paralyzed. In other words I'm a half-dead sheriff, and there ain't a chance I'll ever be all alive!"

Doc Chesney took his eyes from the window, and there were tears in them when he again glanced at Sheriff Jim.

"There's always a chance," he replied unsteadily. These two men had been friends since boyhood and neither would lie to the other. "Doctor Keller—the 'Great Keller,' they call him in New York—is the only one I know of who can get that bullet out of your skull and bring the other half of you back to life."

"The Great Keller," Sheriff Jim said musingly. "He's in New York, and I'm out here in Sun Dog. We're three thousand miles apart!"

"That's right. And his fee alone for the operation is five thousand dollars. Then there'd be the added expense of bringing him out here, if he'd come."

"Well, I've got a thousand, Doc."

Doc Chesney sat down on the cot with a sigh. "I've just been thinking, Sheriff Jim," he said. "I've got a thousand I could put to it. And if I just passed the word among the folks here, why, they'd chip in—"

"Not that, Doc," Sheriff Jim protested. "I've got some pride left. No, we'll forget that. Besides, you've sorta hinted around about this operation, but you wasn't very hopeful. I ain't got a chance, and you know it, but you don't like to say so."

The window was wide open, and through it came the warm spring sunlight and the scent of new-leafed sage. A bee buzzed into the room and out again. Sheriff Jim's eyes followed it wistfully. Presently a herd of cattle thundered down the street in a cloud of dust on the way to the loading chutes at the stockyards corral. Ahead, on the flanks and behind, rode care-free, yipping buckaroos. Men and women smiled at them as they went about their business.

Sheriff Jim had been a part of all that life. He was a part of it yet, but only in the capacity of a helpless spectator. He felt sure he would never be anything else unless a miracle happened.

Doc Chesney appeared able to read his thoughts, for he shook his head slowly and tried hard to smile.

"No, it's no use, and you know it, Doc," Sheriff Jim said to him. There was a catch in his voice as he went on: "You've got some dope that'll end all this mercifully. You know what I mean. You will, won't you, Doc?"

Doc Chesney had to fight hard to control his emotions.

"No, Sheriff Jim, not that. I said there was a chance, and I meant it. But not that—that way." Footsteps were coming along the corridor. "I guess that's Grace," he added with relief. "I'll be looking in on you soon. So long, Sheriff Jim."

Grace Gibson entered as the young doctor went out. Their eyes met for a brief moment, and the doctor nodded slightly. The girl's face paled a little, which only seemed to enhance her beauty. She worked as nurse when patients were obliged to stay at the doctor's house.

She closed the sickroom door and stood with her back to it, just looking at Sheriff Jim. He turned his head on the pillow and looked at her, a grin lifting the corners of his mouth.

"Well, Doc told me, Grace."

"Oh, Jim!" was all the girl could say as she came to the side of the cot.

She looked down at Sheriff Jim, and he looked up into her tear-dimmed eyes. In them he read only pity for himself. But he was wrong; dead wrong. It wasn't pity; it was love. But Sheriff Jim had never had much time to devote to women and could not distinguish between the two.

GRACE was looking at a handsome man of twenty-six, whose face no longer carried the healthy tan of the outdoors because of long weeks in bed. His hair was a mass of unruly brown curls, and the eyes beneath it were dark and always laughing. His shoulders were broad, his arms well muscled.

That picture faded presently and another took its place. In imagination, Grace, through the surgery window, was watching Black Benson and his gang of outlaws as they rushed out of the bank to mount their horses, carrying loot. Guns were blazing, horses rearing and snorting in fear, men shouting in her memory. And in the center of the street Sheriff Jim was standing, legs spread wide apart, a gun in each hand and working smoothly, deliberately.

Instinctively Grace caught her breath, even as she had done on that memorable day, and in her mind's eye she was seeing saddles emptied, men sprawling in the deep dust, some to writhe in agony, others to lie still where they had fallen. And again she was hearing the familiar ring of coins as a wounded outlaw, stopped in his tracks by one of Sheriff Jim's heavy slugs, dropped the sack he was carrying.

The girl was clasping and unclasping her hands in excitement as she recalled to memory that epic fight. Black Benson, the leader and now the last of that notorious gang, sat his horse alone, exchanging shot for shot with that determined, cool, smooth-working young sheriff.

And because the window was open, Grace was even then hearing the ominous trigger clicks that proclaimed empty guns. Sheriff Jim's empty guns. The girl was recalling the look of diabolical triumph on Black Benson's ugly face as he took deliberate aim at the sheriff, and fired. Sheriff Jim was sinking slowly to the ground even as Black Benson wheeled his horse and spurred away.

That picture, too, faded away, and Grace was looking at the true one; yet one she could not bring herself to believe was real. There lay Sheriff Jim who, to the casual observer, appeared sound in body. Nevertheless, those broad shoulders and well-muscled arms had been paralyzed by pressure of Black Benson's bullet against the sheriff's brain.

Grace's training in the sickroom came to her aid in time to prevent her breaking down completely.

"So what now, Sheriff Jim?" she asked, forcing herself to speak lightly.

"Well, I've got my ranch left, Grace," he replied. "Guess I'll spend the rest of my days there. Will you help me dress, please? From now on I'll be known as the wheel-chair sheriff, or the half-dead sheriff. Only," he added with a touch of bitterness, "I ain't a sheriff no more."

Grace Gibson pulled the shirt sleeves over arms that were useless, straightened out the trigger fingers that had made Sun Dog County a mighty unhealthy place in the past for law violators, and fought hard to keep the tears back while she did it.

She lifted the cartridge belt and holstered Colts from the back of a chair and started to put them away in a suitcase.

"Buckle 'em around me, Grace," Sheriff Jim pleaded. "I'd like the boys to see me wearing my guns as I'm driven outa town; it'll make me feel a bit less helpless."

JODY BLYE, the old cowpoke whom Sheriff Jim had hired to run his ranch because no one else would give him a job, was on hand with the team and wagon. He helped Doc Chesney lift the young sheriff and his wheel-chair into the wagon. A few rope hitches secured it against rolling, and then Jody mounted to the seat and picked up the lines.

"Why couldn't it have been me 'stead of him?" old Jody inquired of himself silently. "I'm ready for the scrap pile anyway."

Doc Chesney waved a hand, but dare not utter a word. Grace looked at the sheriff through swimming eyes.

"We'll come out to the ranch to see you often, Sheriff Jim," she promised chokingly. Then Jody Blye started cussing the gentle team and slapping their rumps with the lines in order to hide the choke in his own voice.

"You noticed the way Grace looked at me, Jody?" Sheriff Jim inquired huskily when they had passed the outskirts. "That's pity, savvy? And listen, you stove-up old buckaroo, if I ever ketch you looking at me that way, I'll bust you one. I can stand anything 'cept pity."

Both men laughed at the idea of a paralyzed man striking another on the nose, and their talk consequently became lighter, gayer until they reached the ranch.

But poor old Jody Blye was now, at one and the same time, sad and happy. He had a task to perform in caring for Sheriff Jim, whom he had learned to love like a son. And it was really a pleasant task for Jody too, because it gave him a sense of importance, of usefulness, besides enabling him to show his gratitude for having been given the chance to earn his living and remain free and independent as of old.

Each morning he wheeled Sheriff Jim out on the veranda, and as the sun circled the house, he moved the wheel-chair so that the helpless man could get the full benefit of its warmth and light. And, as they had promised, Doc Chesney and Grace Gibson rode out to the ranch frequently.

"They'd make a swell married couple, them two, Jody," Sheriff Jim observed after one of their visits. "Yeah, they'd hit it off swell."

Cowboys, from all over the county, rode in to visit with Sheriff Jim, telling him of their work, their woes and their joys, as well as their pet hates and fondest ambitions. Ranchers and their wives came too, the latter always bringing good things to eat or articles made with wool and thread and nimble needles. They shooed old Jody out of their way and gave the house a thorough cleaning, then sewed buttons on Sheriff Jim's shirts.

Sheriff Jim's gratitude was touching, so much so that, when they left, Jody noticed that he was usually sad; that he would sit for hours staring out across the expanse of dull green sage to the distant horizon with fixed eyes.

"It's the way they all look at me, Jody," he once told the old cowpoke; but only once. "Eyes fulla pity. I guess they savvy, like Doc Chesney does, that I'm just as good as dead. I can't stand it, Jody!"

And although Jody's heart was just one big, constant ache for the man he loved, he did the best he could to cheer him up during those melancholy spells.

"You ain't dead yet, Sheriff Jim," he retorted often, pretending to be very indignant at the very suggestion. "You're just sorta resting up a bit, that's all. You're young, and you'll get over it. Now, if you was like me, all dried up and not wuth a tinker's damn, why, I wouldn't give another of the same damns for yore chances. Fact is, I'd—" Then Jody checked himself just in time, for the words that had almost slipped from his tongue were the kind no man in Sheriff Jim's condition should hear.

ONE day the sheriff startled old Jody by demanding his guns. "Lay 'em in my lap, Jody," Sheriff Jim directed. "I just like to look at 'em. Them two smooth-working babies shore have stood by me in some pretty tight corners."

"I'll say they have," Jody commented. But although he returned to his work in the kitchen, he stood where he could keep an eye on the sheriff, who was outlined on the veranda by the slanting rays of the setting sun.

The old man's eyes were moist as he watched Sheriff Jim try to make those lifeless arms and hands obey his will; tried to curl flexless forefingers around the triggers. Beads of perspiration stood out on his brow from the effort, and then he fell back in the wheel-chair with a look in his eyes Jody had never seen before.

That expression remained in his eyes always after that, except when visitors came, particularly Grace Gibson. Jody was half sick with worry because he was wise enough in the ways of the world to know just about what was passing through Sheriff Jim's mind.

One night, when the chill air swept across the sagebrush wastes, Jody lit the lamp, then wheeled Sheriff Jim inside. For some unknown reason, the helpless man appeared more cheerful than usual, which made Jody happy for the first time in many weeks.

"Jody," the sheriff announced suddenly, "get a pen and paper and write a letter for me in that cross between a wounded coyote's tracks and a jackrabbit's hind leg that you use."

Always glad to be of service, old Jody bustled about until he had things ready. Pen poised over the open mouth of an ink bottle, he grinned broadly.

"All right, boss, shoot. I'll bet it's to Grace Gibson."

"What makes you think that, Jody? She only pities me. And even supposing she didn't, what sort of a skunk would I be to lead a girl like that on? No, Jody, I ain't writing to no girl, but to a man. Get set, old-timer."

"Well, how d'yer want it started, Sheriff Jim? Shall I put down 'Dear Sir,' or 'Dear Friend,' or just plain 'Mister So-and-So?' "

"Just how would a feller address a letter to Black Benson, Jody?"

Jody Blye's chair shot backward over the floor as he leaped to his feet with sudden indrawn breath. There he stood, regarding the sheriff with unbelieving eyes and twitching mouth.

"Black Benson!" He gasped out the words in an awed whisper. "Sheriff Jim, have you suddenly gone plumb loco? What you wanna write *that* rat for?"

"I wanna hire him, Jody," the sheriff replied quietly.

Jody fell back on the chair, his mouth wide in astonishment.

"Hire him? What the heck for?"

"To kill me, Jody," the sheriff replied grimly. "Doc Chesney won't do it, my friends won't, and I know that it'd only be wasting my breath to ask you to."

"I'll say it would!" Jody cried out. "Why, Sheriff Jim—"

"You set right down, Jody, and write Black Benson that I've got a thousand dollars I'll give him if he'll come here and finish the job he started—kill all of me. Can't I get even *you* to understand, Jody? I can't go on living this way; it's worse than death. I'm just a pitiful object; I can read it in everybody's eyes. And I can't stand no more of it, Jody! I'm liable to live for years—like this—alive and yet dead—a nuisance to everyone, including myself!"

IT was the first time Jody Blye had listened to such an outburst from him, and it left the old cowpoke speechless with terror and despair.

"I hate to have to mention this, Jody," Sheriff Jim went on in quieter vein, "but I've done you a few favors in the past. All I'm asking in return is that you write Black Benson and then keep yore trap shut about it."

At last Jody Blye found his voice and began to plead as never before.

"You're putting me on the spot, Sheriff Jim!" he almost sobbed. "When you put it up to me that way, you know danged well I can't refuse. But I'm only doing it 'cause you're making me; and it's the only unfair thing I've ever knowed you to pull. What'll Doc Chesney say, and Miss Grace, and all the neighbors? You—"

Sheriff Jim's eyes were not paralyzed, nor was his tongue. Those eyes snapped and into his voice came the old, familiar ring of command as he gave the laconic order.

"Write, Jody, blast you!"

And old Jody wrote with a palsied hand, and with tears falling on the spotless white paper. When the letter was finished, he put it in an envelope.

"How'll—how'll you get it to Black Benson?" he asked in a shaky voice. "Nobody knows where his hideout is."

"You saddle up and ride to Sun Dog, Jody," Sheriff Jim directed. "Find 'Card' Doyle and hand him that letter. I've always suspected he knowed more about Black Benson than he had oughter."

Jody Blye made one last, frantic effort to get Sheriff Jim to reconsider.

"They's still a chance; Doc Chesney told me so. If you'll just hang on for a couple years I'll have enough fat steers ready to sell that'll pay that

feller Kelly—or whatever his name is—can take that slug outa yore skull."

"Two years!" Sheriff Jim sighed. "Two eternities, you mean, Jody. No, you ride like blazes and remember to keep that trap shut. I'm trusting you, and you know what that means."

So Jody Blye rode into Sun Dog and hunted up Card Doyle, a man dwarfed in body and soul. He took the letter and read it, a peculiar smile making his distorted face still more frightful. Then he shoved the letter into his pocket, turned, and went back inside his house without a word.

But old Jody Blye simply could not return to Sheriff Jim and the ranch with a load like that on his mind. So, despite the trust reposed in him, he rode to the little hospital and told Doc Chesney the whole story. Doc closed the surgery door so that Grace Gibson couldn't hear, and then looked mighty serious.

"Guess I'd better ride out tomorrow and have a talk with Sheriff Jim," he observed. "However, I'm not a bit surprised at the turn of events, Jody. A man can stand just so much and no more. Sheriff Jim has evidently lost heart. But maybe Black Benson is the answer to the problem." His eyes were thoughtful.

DOC CHESNEY rode out next morning to visit Sheriff Jim, but what took place between them was a secret, for they had sent old Jody about his business. But after the doctor had ridden away and Jody had returned to the house, he thought he saw a decided change in Sheriff Jim's expression.

"Feeling better, boss?" Jody inquired hopefully.

"Yes, Jody. It won't be long now before I'm out of my misery. That's why I'm feeling better." He smiled.

Despair gripped Jody again, and although he had done the chores, he had to hurry back to the barn to hide his emotion. However, he had seen many strange things in years on the range and had learned to reason with himself.

"Mebbe," he mused aloud, "it's best this way. And if Doc Chesney sides in with Sheriff Jim, there ain't nothing I can do 'cept grin and bear it."

But he forgot all about that when, a few days later, Sheriff Jim ordered him to saddle up and stay away from the ranch for the balance of that day.

"This is the date we set in that letter—for Black Benson to finish the job he started," he reminded Jody.

"I won't do it!" Jody cried out defiantly. "I'll not—"

"You come right over close to me, Jody," Sheriff Jim declared, "and don't you start blubbering. I've got something to tell you, and I don't want nobody else to hear."

It was pitch dark outside when Black Benson inched through the door of Card Doyle's den in Sun Dog, a dope dive he had opened since Sheriff Jim's unfortunate wound.

"Is this straight?" Black Benson demanded. "I've meant to come back and kill him anyway. He spoiled our getaway, the damned law rat! This'll be a pleasure!"

"It's on the level," Card assured him. "I've worked on it and found out a few things. That star-toter's tried to get just about everybody to blow his fool brains out."

"Nobody cached out at the ranch, waiting in ambush for me to show up, huh?"

"No. I've had Butch Coiner watching the spread for days, like you said for me to, and he's just rode in to report the coast all clear. What's more, that damned ol' buzzard, Jody Blye, is in town and has paid for a room in the Brand Hotel. So the sheriff's keeping his word, as he wrote you he would."

"Fine work, Card," Black Benson said grudgingly. "I'll be on my way to collect some easy dough. Though it'd take more than a lousy thousand

to make up for that gold he didn't let us get away with."

"Hey, wait a minute," Card said. "I want my money, right now. My motto is cash on the nail. Two hundred smackers, feller; that's my fee. There's many a slip, you know. You might bump inta somebody, between here and the star-toter's spread, who might be a mite quicker on the draw than you. Then what'd I do about my cut?"

Black Benson paid over the money with ill-concealed anger, then went out. Keeping to the shadow of the alleys, he approached the rear of the Brand Hotel, stole silently up the back stairs, and was inside Jody Blye's room before the latter realized it.

"I've just been checking up on you, old buzzard," the outlaw grinned at him over a leveled gun. "I wanted to make sure of where you was and that you'd stay put. Lay down on the bed."

He had old Jody trussed up and gagged in just a few minutes, but not before the ancient cowpoke had given him a lurid description of outlaws in general and Black Benson in particular. After that, the outlaw returned to his horse, mounted, and set off for Sheriff Jim's ranch.

Cunning and cautious, Black Benson made the rounds of the out-buildings, and finally peered through the ranch-house window. Sheriff Jim was sitting in the wheel-chair facing the front door, his lifeless hands in his lap, an Indian blanket thrown over his knees and legs.

The outlaw stole around to the door, threw it wide open suddenly, and leaped aside with drawn gun. Seconds of silence passed, to be broken presently by Sheriff Jim's voice from inside.

"Come in, Benson. I've been expecting you. I'm alone."

"I've already made sure of that," the outlaw said sneeringly, as he stepped over the threshold and closed the door. "But they's one or two things yet to make sure of."

HE crossed to Sheriff Jim with leveled gun, and raised the blanket on his lap, peering under. Next, he picked up each of the sheriff's lifeless hands and let them drop back into his lap, chuckling brutally. Then he shoved a hand down each side of the wheel-chair, between the arms and the seat cushion.

"If it's a gun you're looking for, Benson," Sheriff Jim said, "you're only wasting time." He nodded toward the wall, where his guns hung in their holsters. "There's mine," he added. "I want to be killed, not kill."

"And I'm damned glad to oblige," Black Benson snarled. "But hold yore hosses a minute, feller. I gotta make sure of the cash. Where is it?"

"In that tin box by the door, Benson. You walked right past it as you came in. You'll find a thousand in it. Better count it."

"Are you telling me?" the outlaw sneered.

He turned and went back to the money-box, stooped over to pick it up. He turned back the lid and was chuckling greedily at the sight of the bills.

Then he turned to Sheriff Jim. "I'm damn glad you asked me to do the killing. I'm not even sorry that it's doing you a kindness to put you out of your misery, 'cause it'll be a joy to me to see your blood pouring out, and to know that my gun blasted out your life."

His words seemed to arouse an old fighting spirit in Sheriff Jim. "I've changed my mind, Benson," he announced suddenly, a new light in his face. "I don't want to die. I don't know what's been in me to take a coward's way out. You can take the thousand, but I don't want to be killed. I'll face life, somehow."

"But I am going to kill you, you snoopy law hound!" Black Benson shouted, his gun snaking into his hand.

At that moment Sheriff Jim's right foot moved. From what appeared to be the toe of his boot lanced a jet of

orange flame, followed instantly by an ear-splitting report. Black Benson straightened with an effort and spun around as the sheriff's foot continued to move rapidly back and forth. Report after report crashed out.

A surprised expression leaped into the outlaw's eyes as his gun clattered to the floor. Slowly he sagged against the wall, gradually folding up. Then the surprised expression changed to one of intense hatred.

"If you're still able to see, Benson, take a good look—yore last one," Sheriff Jim told him quietly.

He raised the booted foot slightly, lifting the blanket. Before his eyes glazed over entirely, Black Benson caught sight of a heavy Colt, with its barrel tilted upward, secured to the footrest of the wheel-chair by small blocks of wood and baling wire.

"Me and Doc Chesney thought this little trap up, Benson," the sheriff explained grimly, "and old Jody fixed the gun in place—his own gun. You forgot that only half of me is dead—the half from the waist up. I couldn't fan a gun with my hands, but I could, and did, pull the trigger with this string tied to my foot. No, Benson, I'm only half dead, but you're just about *all* dead. And, dead or alive, yore rotten hide will bring five thousand dollars of the states' money in reward."

SHERIFF JIM heard murmuring voices some time before he opened his eyes and stared fixedly at the foot of the cot in Doc Chesney's house. Out of a gray fog loomed faces that were at first vague, then gradually clearer.

There were three of them, two very familiar and one not so much so. Doc Chesney was biting his nails. Grace Gibson stood very rigid, very pale, her lovely eyes fixed on Sheriff Jim.

The third face was Doctor Keller's —the "Great Keller," brain expert extraordinary. Of the three, he was the most composed, almost icy cold. A big man, with a mop of snow-white hair, burning eyes and thin-lipped mouth. Those long delicate fingers, which had made him so famous, were pressed together to form a tent, as if he were talking in the lecture room to his internes.

Sheriff Jim's eyes rested on that face as recollection slowly returned. He remembered now that Doctor Keller had come to Sun Dog, and knew he was regaining his senses after being operated upon. That cool, calculating, white-haired man at the foot of the cot was a scientist and, as he had been told, without any heart or feeling. It had been said of him that only two things interested him—his profession and money.

"Oh, Sheriff Jim!" Grace Gibson could not remain quiet a moment longer. "Oh, Jim!"

She stepped to his side. Doc Chesney took a hasty step after her, reached out a hand to check her. Doctor Keller's voice, sharp and clear, halted him.

"Let her alone. Let's see what happens."

Grace went down on her knees, put out her arms and took Sheriff Jim into their warm embrace.

"Don't cry, Grace, don't!" Sheriff Jim protested weakly. "I just can't stand yore pity, gal."

"Pity, Jim, pity?" the girl sobbed. "Oh, do I have to tell you it isn't pity?"

A smile spread slowly across Sheriff Jim's wan face. And then he did a thing he had not been able to do for months and months; a thing he had been afraid he never would be able to do.

He raised his arms slowly, and Grace put them around her shoulders with a glad cry.

"Whoopee!" Doc Chesney yelled, forgetting his dignity. "You're *all* alive now, Sheriff Jim!" But a sharp tap on the shoulder silenced him.

"Please remember the patient must be kept quiet, Doctor Chesney," the great specialist snapped. "Now we'll go to your office and arrange about the settlement of my fee."

Doc Chesney ushered the Great Keller inside his simple office. There Doctor Keller reached for a cigar, bit off the tip savagely, and lighted it.

"Now, you listen to me, young man," he suddenly exploded, pointing the smoking cigar directly at the Sun Dog doctor. "There'll be no fee."

Doc Chesney came out of his chair with a bound.

"What!" he gasped. "No fee? But you said—"

"Quite so," Doctor Keller interrupted, and waved him back to his chair. "Many of my patients think I was born, raised and educated in New York. But I was raised on a ranch in Arizona. As a matter of fact, my father was a sheriff, died with his boots on. So, as I said, there'll be no fee, Doctor Chesney."

Doc Chesney was already half way to the door.

"I'm going to tell Sheriff Jim and Grace!" he announced. "That's the kind of medicine that'll put him on his feet in jig time."

"Yes, that and Grace." The Great Keller smiled. "You must never overlook the value of the ladies in relation to our profession, Doctor Chesney."

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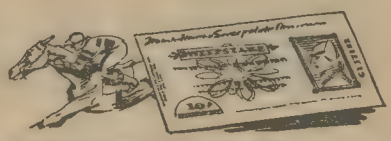

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Hellbent for

Smashing Novelette

The minute he swapped lead with the gun-handy Goddards, Lee Maxon knew he was headed for boot hill. For he could rescue a starved youngster and a stricken girl from a renegade's reign—if he was willing to pave a path to his tombstone with vengeance bullets.

Boot Hill

By Joe Archibald

Author of "Law's-End Legion," etc.

CHAPTER I

Bullet-sent Waif

LEE MAXON swung a leg over the horn of his swellfork saddle and sucked sweet smoke from an almost spent cigarette into his lungs. The stub made a fiery little comet in the gathering dusk when he flipped it from his fingers. His eyes were fixed on a drunken sign on the bole of a giant oak tree. Weather-dimmed black paint announced: WATERMAN—20 MILES—CIRCLE DOT RANCH—15 MILES. The rider was very tired. Fifteen more miles seemed as many thousand. His black

bronc was dust-covered and reeking with sweat.

"I reckon," he spoke aloud, his voice booming in the stillness, "Goddard can wait for me another day." Leaning forward in the saddle, he studied the terrain lying before him. An alien sound startled him. His horse snorted and pirouetted on the shale. Vaxon drew a six-gun, probing the thicket on one side of the dugway with wary eyes. There it was again—a sound like a frightened animal crashing through underbrush. This time it was punctuated by a choked scream.

The rider slipped out of the kak when he saw a pair of wildly clawing, grubby little hands break out of the thicket. They were followed by the figure of a little boy with a sunburned, freckled face. There was a whiteness of terror under the tan and the child's nostrils were dilated as he panted for breath. At sight of Lee Maxon he dropped to his knees and wound his wiry little arms around the young rider's legs.

"Shore now, little feller," Lee said kindly, stooping to lift the boy up, "yuh must have seen a three-headed rattler. Stop cryin' now an'—"

"He—he's after me, Mister," the little boy forced through quivering lips. "He'll kill me, he will. Please, don't let him—don't! I can't stand no more. He—hit me—with—"

It was then that Lee Maxon saw the blood on the back of the boy's ragged shirt. A surge of rage sent the blood pounding through the man's veins and the little blue lines at his temples swelled. A red streak, oozing blood, was visible through a rent in the dirty cloth.

"Take it easy, son," he said evenly, his eyes hardening. "Get over there by that rock now. Nobody's goin' tuh hit yuh again. I promise yuh that." His throat was constricted by an unfamiliar emotion as he watched the bedraggled little figure move like a whipped dog to the big boulder and huddle against it. Never had Lee beheld such terror in a human being. It had all happened so quickly that he was hardly prepared for the raucous curses that now came from the thicket as a heavy body threshed through.

The boy cried out in panic: "He's comin', mister. Please, mister, don't give me back." Tears came in a flood and the boy covered his wide, staring eyes with two grimy hands that shook.

A man leaped out of the brush—a loose-lipped, unshaven, squat individual with eyes that were shot with blood and glowing with a venomous light. His massive head swung from side to side like that of an enraged bear. Finally his eyes came to rest on the fear-paralyzed boy. A curse belched from his lips.

"There yuh are—yuh ornery little coyote! Damn yuh, I'm gonna teach yuh not tuh run away again. I'll cut yore hide intuh—" He leaped forward like a charging rhino, a quirt in his hand.

"Git away from that kid!" Lee Maxon's voice was fiery. "Touch that kid an' I'll shoot yore lights out!"

The man froze and swung his evil eyes toward the strange voice. "Yuh tellin' me what tuh do about this kid? Keep outa this, hombre, if yuh want tuh live tuh see the sun again." He lunged toward the rock, quirt lifted.

LEE MAXON reached him in two great strides and smashed a powerful fist against his hairy jaw. The bully went sprawling and his face scraped the sharp rocks and became a smear of blood. He lay on the spot, stunned, cursing in savage delirium. Lee Maxon stepped toward the boy and held out his hand. The boy's little body was shaking as if he were gripped with a chill. His feverish eyes swung from the groveling man on the ground to the face of his rescuer and there was a great wonderment breaking through the fear that still harassed him.

"Yuh hit him—mister—yuh hit Bull G—" The name meant nothing to Lee. He watched the man get to his feet slowly and paw the blood from his

face. His back was turned upon the young rider. Suddenly, with a quick twist of his squat bulk, the man wheeled about, splayed fingers striking for his gun. With a powerful swing of his left arm Lee Maxon shoved the little boy from him and struck for the Colt at his side. The hammer was kicking down against the shell almost before the gun had cleared the tied-down holster. From the rocky sides of the towering tors the roar echoed again and again. A bellow of pain came from the loose-lipped man and he staggered backward, one hand clutching at his chest. A more gripping fear than he had drummed into the heart of the little boy clouded his incredulous, bulging eyes. He coughed horribly, sank to his knees. His loose lips moved and words bubbled from his throat with red spume.

"They—they'll git—yuh—fer this!" He pitched forward on his face, then, fingers reflexing on the loose shale.

Lee Maxon turned to the ragged little boy. Elbows drawn into his sides as if fighting the pain of the red welt on his back, he stared down at the dead man. A numbing horror dulled the lad's senses so that he did not hear Lee speak until the man had repeated his words three times.

"What's yore name, little feller?" the rider asked gently, drawing the child away from the thing that lay on the ground.

"They don't call me much 'ceptin' 'Brat,'" he replied quaveringly. A moment later he set his bloodless lips and screwed up his face with a grimace of pain.

"We've got to get that wound washed, yuh poor little jigger," said Lee understandingly. "Say—now that's a name. I'll call yuh 'Jigger'!" He picked the boy up and carried him to the bronc. It pained him to feel the bony, underfed little body. His throat tightened when the boy asked a timorous question.

"Where yuh takin' me—mister? Yuh ain't takin—me—back tuh—?"

The range rider halted. "Where?" he clipped suddenly. "That hombre—yuh spoke his name. Tell me where yuh—?"

"Nope," the boy bit out with determination. "I ain't tellin'. You'd take me back. I—ple-e-ease, mister—" and the frail little body began to quiver with suppressed sobs while tears welled into his eyes. "Take me with yuh—take me away—ple-e-e-ease."

"Little feller," Lee Maxon said emphatically, "I wouldn't want tuh let the worst hound dog in the world be with men like that. Don't guess the one I killed was yore father. Yuh don't look much like he did. A father couldn't beat his son like that. Yuh got a ma?"

"No!" It was the last word he could get out of the terrified lad.

LEE swallowed hard and shook his head. He placed the boy on the bronc and swung into the saddle behind him. "We're goin' tuh be great pals—you and me, Jigger," he said as they loped along. "I'm goin' tuh get us a clean bed tuh sleep in an' plenty of biscuits tuh eat. I figure every little two-legged critter ought tuh expect that much. Think we'll get along, little feller?"

The little boy nodded his head but instead of speaking began to cry. Lee Maxon held the bony body tightly against him.

"Not used tuh kind words, are yuh Jigger?" His own eyes were a little shiny. A long silence followed. Then at last a quavery voice came to Lee from the haven of his shoulder.

"They'll come after me—I know it. They'll foller yuh. But yuh won't let 'em take me, huh, mister? The lawmen can't—?"

Lee said reassuringly: "No lawman'll bother us, son. We're goin' tuh camp soon and ride on tuhmorrow. I got me a job down yonder, Jigger. Maybe I can find a bunk for yuh. If I don't, we go on somewheres else. Feller that was a friend of mine, when I was a kid like you, sent me a

letter tuh come down an' go tuh work for him. Got sick of bein' deputy to a lawman up in Piperock County so I figured I'd start in punchin' cows—" He did not tell the boy that his reputation as a Coltman had had something to do with the offer. That there was trouble down where the big ranch lay.

"I'll help yuh, mister," Jigger promised. "I kin work real hard. Honest I kin. I'll wash yore clothes an' clean yore boots. An' I'll curry yore bronc for yuh. Anythin'—even die for yuh, Mister, long as yuh take me with yuh."

Lee Maxon was touched to the quick. It was a while before he could speak. "Shore now, that ain't a he-man's job. Anyways, yuh got tuh go tuh school first off. We'll stop here, Jigger. There's a nice cold stream goin' through the gully an' the water'll take the hurt out of that welt on yore back."

"I don't mind it now," the little boy said stoutly when his rescuer was lifting him from the saddle. "I wouldn't mind nothin' now I guess. But," he added as an afterthought, "I'm awful hungry."

"We'll have beans an' cold biscuits in no time at all," Lee told him. "I got 'em in my bags. Here—take this coffee pot and get some water in it."

The boy gripped the battered pot eagerly and ran to the gurgling stream. Lee followed. On the grassy bank he drew the boy to him and began to take the shirt from the bruised little body. The blood on his back had dried and the cloth was glued to the wound.

"Keep your teeth tight shut, little feller, because it's goin' tuh hurt a might," the rider said, setting his own jaws together.

"Go ahead, mister," Jigger said bravely. "I won't beller." He was as good as his word, uttering not a whimper while Lee Maxon was washing the wound. With an application of salve which he produced from his saddle bag the big man took some of the sting out of the raw flesh.

The rider was about to put the boy's ragged shirt back on when his attention was caught by a scar, an old X-shaped scar that showed whitely against the bronzed skin of his arm.

"Where'd yuh get that scar, Jigger?"

"I—I—" The waif lifted his arm and looked at it curiously. "I don't 'zactly remember," he said doubtfully. "I—I giss I've forgot 'bout everythin'."

"Yeah," Lee Maxon whispered, "I don't wonder." He was sure, as he spoke, that the man back there had never had any right to this boy. Somewhere there were people who loved Jigger—people whose hearts had been torn asunder in the belief that the child was dead. "I reckon I got a job tuh do, little feller," he said gently. "Yeah—I'm keepin' yuh, Jigger, until I find—until I'm sure that yuh—" He broke off and said: "Well, let's rustle grub, little feller.

THE boy's cheeks seemed to fill out even before he was fed. He helped Lee build a fire and brought water for coffee making. They warmed the beans in a pan and these, together with cold biscuits, made their meal. Both man and boy ate ravenously.

"Better save some vittals for tomorrow's ride," Lee suggested wisely to Jigger when the boy was about to take a third helping.

"Awright," he agreed immediately. "I never had so much tuh eat before. I always had tuh wait until they was through an' they'd gimme what was left. Once I was so hungry I tried tuh steal grub but they almost killed me."

"Yuh've shore had it pretty tough, ain't yuh Jigger?" Lee said in a hollow voice. "Seems like sometimes it's hard tuh believe what the gospel teaches."

The boy's eyes swung toward him. In the light of the fire they held a shocked expression.

"Don't say that, mister," the little-

boy voice admonished the man. "Gospel's true. I—prayed somebody would come an' take me away."

"Prayed?" Lee repeated, his forehead wrinkling. "Who taught yuh tuh pray?"

"I—I dunno," the boy answered thoughtfully. "I just did, I guess. Seems nobody had tuh. It just—come—tuh me. The words was always inside my head, I giss, mister."

"Call me 'Lee'," the man said and placed an arm around Jigger's shoulders. "Let me hear yuh pray, little feller."

The boy's eyes held a question. Staring strangely at Lee, he began slowly: "Our Father—which art in heaven—hallowed—"

"That's enough, Jigger," Maxon cut in huskily. "Now I *know* yuh never belonged tuh that critter. Git tuh bed, son. We got a long pull when the sun comes up."

Long after the boy was asleep Lee Maxon sat staring into the embers of his camp fire. Every so often he would look toward the pinched face framed by blanket covering. The gray eyes in which many men had read their doom were as soft as those of a woman. His thoughts were scattered when the sleeping boy suddenly squirmed the blankets and let out a strangled cry of terror. His little body jerked spasmodically and he cried out: "I—I'm falling—falling—"

The rider got up quickly and shook the boy to wakefulness. Eyes drugged with horror and heavy sleep looked unseeingly at the man. Finally they cleared but Jigger's breathing was fitful and his thin little face clammy from fright.

"There, there, Jigger," Lee said soothingly. "Yuh just had a bad dream. Poor little feller, yuh've been kicked around so much—"

"A dream?" Jigger whispered, eyes wide. He gripped Lee's arm tenaciously. "But one time it wasn't, Lee. I know it wasn't."

"What do yuh mean, little feller?"

"I can't hardly remember," the boy said, thinking with effort. "Seems like so long ago. I was ridin' in a stage coach, I giss, an' a lot of men with black things covering their faces—like I just saw in my dream—they started shootin'. They killed—people. Then—I giss the stage tipped over or something 'cause I was falling—a long ways, Mister. Then I woke up—just like now—but my head hurt. It don't hurt now, though." He looked up at Maxon with confidence and waning fear. The man drew him close, brain a seething eddy.

"Take it easy, little feller," he said after a moment. "Maybe it wasn't a dream—that time. Try and think. D'yuh remember what anybody there—looked like?" He hardly breathed while waiting for an answer.

"I—I don't know—I can't remember—nothin' more," the boy said on convulsive breaths. "Ever since that first time—I fell—I don't remember much besides gettin' licked—an' goin' hungry. I run away—" He stopped talking suddenly, fearful that in the extremity of his terror he might have told more than was wise. "Yuh won't take me back—yuh won't—promise, mister!"

"I promise," said Lee Maxon, his lips warped with a cryptic smile. "I reckon you an' me are goin' tuh stick tuhgether, Jigger." He pressed the boy down onto his bed of boughs and covered him tenderly with a blanket. "I'll be right here—don't be afraid," he said, taking the bony little hand into his. At last the little boy dropped off into a calm, deep sleep.

Lee Maxon and his young charge didn't start riding the next day until the sun was almost overhead. Toward dusk Jigger fell asleep again and the man drew the small human bundle closer to him, urging the black horse to a brisker pace.

"Just a few more miles, Jigger—an' yuh'll be in a soft bed."

THE CIRCLE DOT ranch buildings were six miles to westward. Lee reined his bronc in front of a

long low bunkhouse just as the last faint tints of day were fading from the sky. Goddard's domain was a giant affair. There were at least a dozen frame buildings inside the circular pole fence. The ranchhouse was large and rambling and half hidden by enormous trees. Climbing vines crept up the stone chimney at one end.

Six or seven punchers looked appraisingly at Maxon as the rider dismounted with his burden. A couple of them edged forward, muttering under their breath. The profile of one of the men was revealed to Lee Maxon and his pulse quickened unpleasantly.

"Didn't expect tuh see yuh here, St. Cloud!" he called out.

A long-faced individual with sleepy eyes grinned and took a step forward. "Well, well," he drawled, "if 'tain't Maxon himself. Got enough of sheriffin', huh? Heard yuh was comin'." He laughed harshly. "Funny—you an' me on the same side of the fence. An' a kid in the—why, that's Goddard's brat! Where did yuh pick him up?"

Lee Maxon's blood became stagnant in his veins. "Goddard's?" he rasped. "What d'yuh mean, St. Cloud?"

"Shore—he run away a few days ago. A lot of the men have been lookin' fer him. Funny yuh should've bumped intuh him."

Jigger was stirring in Lee's arms, the harsh voices having shocked him to wakefulness. When his sleepy eyes cleared and he saw St. Cloud's leering countenance, the boy uttered a cry of terror.

"Yuh brung me back, mister," he wailed, fighting loose from Lee's protecting embrace. "An' yuh promised me. Let me go! Let me go!" His voice rose to a scream.

"Jigger—Jigger!" the man cried hoarsely. "I didn't know—I didn't know this was the place. It's the place I was headin' for." The little boy had jerked himself loose and was running away from Lee. He stumbled into the dark shadows of the cottonwoods and fell to the ground where he lay, a sobbing, despairing heap of helpless humanity.

Lee Maxon turned on the leering man before him: "Seein' yuh here don't smell good tuh me, St. Cloud!" he bit out. "I come tuh see Ray Goddard." Misgiving gripped him as he walked up to the ranchhouse a few moments later. Trouble was an almost tangible element in the night air. His swift appraisal of Goddard's punchers had weeded out at least three men whose nervous hands bore no signs of being hardened by the use of the lass rope. Joe St. Cloud with Ray Goddard! There were sections of the country where St. Cloud's life was forfeit. But Lee Maxon felt an even more stunning shock when he entered the Goddard abode.

CHAPTER II

Circle Dot Death

RAY GODDARD was blusteringly cordial. "Hello, Lee! Been a long time since we met!"

Lee shook the proffered hand cursorily, hoping that the thoughts lurking behind his eyes were hidden from this man to whom, as a kid, he had been very close. He felt a keen sense of disappointment as he studied Ray Goddard with adult eyes. Goddard's face wore no sign of the boy he had once been. Arrogance was personified in this swaggering, bluff, loud-spoken head of the Circle Dot.

"Glad tuh see yuh, Ray," Lee responded to the man's greeting in a hollow voice. He felt his eyes drawn to another person in the room. His scalp tingled as he saw, standing near the big open fireplace, a man whose slanting, expressionless eyes were fixed coldly upon him. Those eyes were mounted in a square, flat face that was the color of half-cured hay. In the flickering light that countenance seemed to belong to a leering

Mongol. Maxon noted the way the man's Colts hung from his shell belt.

"Oh," said Goddard, intercepting the look between the two men, "I want yuh tuh meet Lee Maxon, Quell. Lee, maybe yuh've heard of Bart Quell? He's workin' for the Circle Dot. Yuh'll see a lot of each other."

Lee cut in easily, "Yeah—I've heard of Quell. I saw Joe St. Cloud out there, too, Ray." He paused and eyed the rancher significantly. Goddard's eyes took on a squinting, slantwise expression and his response was insolent.

"D'yuh want tuh work for me, Lee," he sneered, "or does it look a little tough for yuh? I figgered yuh'd savvy my letter—that yuh wasn't comin' tuh no pink tea."

"I want the lowdown, Ray," Lee Maxon came back smartly.

"We're drivin' Circle Dot cows onto Slash O range," Goddard replied blandly. "We've got a reason. The Bishops ain't got no legal hold on their unfenced land. They're only entitled tuh the use of it because they developed water on it. They only got about five hundred head of stock and there's plenty of room for Circle Dot cows. I'm goin' tuh drive 'em in."

"Oh—a range war," Lee commented, raising his eyebrows. "It looks mighty one-sided. What'll the law say about it, Ray?"

The man grinned crookedly. "The Goddards *are* the law around these parts, Lee. My old man is in Waterman. He keeps an office there and the sheriff does what he's told. Yuh git a hundred a month an' found. Take him down tuh the bunkhouse, Quell," he said to his Coltman, assuming the matter was closed. "Have him meet the men. I reckon now we're ready tuh move in on the Slash O tuhmorruh night."

"I'm not sure that I am!" Lee Maxon said with deliberation. "I don't like what I see here, Ray. I never have bunked with polecats. I want tuh know a lot more!"

Ray Goddard's eyes became smoky. "What—f'rinstance, Maxon? I don't mind tellin' you that I expected tuh see a man—come in here tuhnight. Instead—" He swung his eyes toward the door which had burst open suddenly. A Circle Dot puncher dragged the frightened Jigger in behind him and flung him toward Ray Goddard.

"Maxon brought him in, Goddard," the hard-bitten puncher ground out. "Maybe he told yuh?"

"No, he didn't," the Circle Dot owner replied slowly, eyes kindling a savage fire. "So yuh dared to run away ag'in, yuh brat? Yuh know what I said yuh'd git—?" He took a menacing step toward the terrified boy only to be arrested in his stride by the voice of Maxon.

"Leave that boy alone, Goddard! It's about him that yuh'd better come clean. That boy's been beaten—look at the blood on that tattered shirt! He wouldn't tell me where he came from because he was afraid I'd bring him back. He was asleep in the saddle when we rode in here—otherwise he wouldn't be here. I didn't think yuh was the kind of skunk that beat up kids, Ray!"

Quell evinced nervousness. He hitched his shoulders and moved from one foot to the other.

Goddard boomed out: "Keep out of this, Bart. I'll handle it. I—"

"Johnny!" A door swung open and a woman came into the big room. Shock sent Lee Maxon back on his heels as he studied that stultified face. He remembered Ray Goddard's mother as a fragile, kindly sort of person whom he had admired and warmed to as a boy. There was no sparkle in her eyes now and her once full, rosy cheeks were gaunt and sallow. There was mental torture in her hollow eyes, in the lines of her face. Rebellion and fear fought for mastery in her expression. The latter won when Ray Goddard broke out with: "Keep out of this, Ma. I've told yuh before."

Chattel—that was what Mrs. Goddard had become in the years that

had passed since Lee Maxon had responded to her kindness. She turned her eyes upon the young rider and he saw a hunger in them. Lee smiled as he took his hat off in deference to her.

"Hello, Lee," she said tremulously. "It's—good to—see you again." Tears rimmed her eyes as Jigger crept over to her and seized her hand in both of his own.

"Don't let 'em beat me no more, ma'am. I promise—not tuh run away—again. Please, ma'am—"

"Yuh're damned right yuh won't," Ray Goddard's coarse voice cracked. "Take him in there with you."

WHEN Mrs. Goddard and the boy had gone, Lee Maxon's eyes shot loathing at the man who once had been his friend.

"Nobody could've made me believe it, Ray," he bit out. "But I've seen with my own eyes. Yuh've lost your soul somewhere along the back trail. I've seen a lot of bad hombres—but never one who had lost respect for his own mother. Stay here? I'm leavin', Goddard. The other side of the fence from you is good enough for me. Don't try to stop—" Again the door of the ranch-house swung in as though a gust of wind had blown it open. A rider, dust and sweat smearing his face, stopped dead on the threshold when his red-rimmed eyes rested on Lee Maxon.

"Goddard—I found Bull Gavin out there. Drilled through the chest. He's dead, Ray! An' I found the kid's hat near his body. Bull must've caught up with him. St. Cloud says an hombre brought him in here."

Lee Maxon blurted out: "Bull—?"

Goddard yelled: "Yuh gunned him down, huh? Maxon, yuh shore stepped intuh a grave when yuh—Quell, let him have it!"

The gunman moved ahead of Ray Goddard's words. Lee was even quicker. His six-gun was spitting a red hell while Quell's Colt was just getting loose from its holster. The slug tore through Quell's wrist and he reeled back into the corner, face bluish white with surprise and nausea. Another booming roar shook the walls of the room and the man who had found the body of Gavin sank to the floor with a bullet through his ribs.

Ray Goddard had the drop. Lee Maxon knew that when he saw the man's demoniacal face in the swirling gunsmoke. Something happened then. Goddard swore and flung up his arms. Cursing crazily, he tried to kick his legs free of something. Lee suddenly yelled in alarm when he saw the kid—little Jigger—at Goddard's feet. The waif had his bony arms wound around the man's legs and his teeth were trying to force their way through the cloth above one knee.

"I'll stamp yore brains out, yuh hellion," Goddard roared, then tried to snap a wild shot at Maxon. But a sudden twist of the body rocked him off balance and the Colt slug banged harmlessly into the wall.

Lee Maxon bridged the gap in one bound. He swung his fist with every ounce of strength packed into it and cracked it against Ray Goddard's jaw. The man toppled and crashed to the floor. Bart Quell, who had been staggering forward, one arm hanging useless, eyes a little dimmed by pain, stumbled over his prone boss. His six-gun went spinning across the floor.

"Jigger—out the window! Hurry. We'll beat this thing, kid," Maxon shouted. "My bronc is out there at the corner of the bunkhouse. Bring it up here. Sneak down, Jigger. Those hombres out there will be comin' this way."

"Shore I will, Lee," the kid husked and he raced for the open window.

QUELL was struggling to his feet but Maxon smashed him back onto the floor with a blow to the face. With incredible haste he tore the man's cowhide vest off and put it on. Then he grabbed up the man's hat

and put it on in place of his own. The next minute he strode to the door and flung it open. When he stepped out into the night, four men closed in from about twenty feet away where they had been on guard. St. Cloud was in the van, white teeth gleaming.

"Yuh git him, Quell?" he hollered at Lee.

"Yeah—he's t h r o u g h," the stranger to the Circle Dot replied in a muffled voice.

From behind him came a hoarse cry, however. "Joe—it's Maxon! Get him—the dirty skunk!"

Joe St. Cloud cursed and went for his guns. Lee Maxon's were clear of leather before Goddard's voice had completed the grim tocsin. They flamed—thundered. St. Cloud dropped to one knee and his thin frame convulsed as a liquid cough wracked him. His Colts thudded to the dirt and his body covered them as the life flowed out of it in a red stream.

Lee pitched to the side and cheated the death that spewed from three other crashing guns. In the darkness he turned and fired — and turned again. Gunlight stabbed short red fingers through the night. He saw Jigger dragging the black bronc across the yard. A man cursed and roared: "The kid! Let him have it." Lee wheeled and fired his right hand Colt in that direction, the bullets striking the exposed figure of a man near the corner of the house with a merciless, ripping sound.

"Jigger," he cried, "drop down, kid!" Jets of fire bloomed round and vicious in his eyes. A leaden slug clipped his hat brim. Another burned painfully along the flesh at his side. He drove a bullet at the vague image of a man looming up in the swath of smoke-fouled light that came from the ranch-house.

The man faded and then Lee Maxon ran for the black horse. He reached it just as something struck him in the back and sent him plunging into a black, burning hell for several seconds.

Fighting himself out of it, he clawed to the saddle. He reached an arm down for Jigger, wondering how he could manage to lift the boy from the ground. The effort was a terrible one but desperation saw him through.

Ray Goddard was coming down from the ranch-house, his guns beating out a hellish tattoo. Blotches of Colt fire were spotting the darkness near the cottonwoods. Lee could hardly see them—did not hear their crashing detonations. He was hit bad. He knew that. But he had to ride. He would ride until he got the kid miles out into open country—where he would have a chance again. A chance to get away—.

Lee Maxon's brain was reeling crazily and he felt as if there were stabbing knives piercing him through and through. Red mist enshrouded him—took on an ebon hue. From a long distance away came the sound of hoofs pelting against the hardened earth. He did not realize that it was the pounding of his own black's feet. He knew nothing for a long time afterwards. He did not know how Jigger cried over him when he fell from the horse miles from the Circle Dot. The little boy jumped clear and threw his own small trembling frame over the bleeding body of his friend. He lifted Lee's unconscious head and pressed his cheek against the man's face.

He called: "Lee!" a hundred times, his heart thudding sickeningly. "Yuh can't die—Lee," the boy sobbed.

"We're pardners, Lee! Yuh promised me yuh'd stick—" The little boy felt of the cold cheeks and terror curdled his blood. This man was so still—he was bleeding. He could not speak—he was dead. Jigger wanted to die too, when he reached that conclusion. For an hour he clung to the prone figure, his tears wetting Lee Maxon's stony face. Again he was alone. Maybe the Goddard's would find him—and there would not be any Lee to stop those men from kicking

and beating him. The thought turned Jigger's heart to a lump of ice.

He got up and stared into the terrible darkness around him. Shadows seemed to hold horrible things. From afar came the howl of a coyote. The droning of nocturnal mites sounded like giant drums in the terrified boy's ears. He felt of Lee's cold face, knelt down and kissed it hurriedly. Then he was running into a stretch of timber—frightened of his loneliness—soul sick at the loss of the only man who had given him a kind word in the period of his life since he had begun to remember.

CHAPTER III

Sidewinder's Rattle

LEE MAXON opened his eyes on a swimming world and the effort to focus them on anything brought a sickening wave of nausea. His head was one throbbing ache. Soon a white plastered ceiling materialized and he heard someone moving in an adjoining room. His eyes wandered about the alien surroundings and at last he found voice to call out gaspingly: "Jigger—Jigger—where are you?" He tried to raise himself on his elbows but a searing pain stretched him stiffly on the bed.

Some one came in then and bent over him. Lee's heavy eyes lost some of their feverish film. Blue eyes that were almost violet met his own. Soft red lips seemed the only other trace of color in a beautiful oval face. A graceful hand brushed wisps of silky, damp hair back from the countenance that fascinated the sick man and a gentle voice beseeched him to be quiet.

"I'm Dell Bishop," the girl introduced herself. "My brother and I run this place—the Slash O. You're hurt bad, Mister. We never thought that you'd pull through. Chet found you and brought you in."

"Ma'am—did he see a little feller—Jigger? He was with me."

"Jigger?" the girl repeated. She shook her head and a puzzled look came into her eyes. "There wasn't anyone with you when he found you. Come now—lie still. Guess he thought you were dead, Mister—?"

"Maxon—Lee Maxon," the wounded rider supplied. "That's the name. They almost got me—the Goddards did. Reckon I stepped intuh somethin' over there, Miss Bishop." He closed his eyes, a feeling of hopelessness gripping him. Jigger must be wandering out there somewhere alone. If Ray Goddard trailed him this time—Lee cursed from frustration and tried again to lift himself up in bed. Dell Bishop placed her soft brown hand against his chest restrainingly.

"Please, Mr. Maxon—that wound might open. You've got to remain quiet. If you die, you can't find him, can you?"

Her patient shook his head with weariness. "No, ma'am, I couldn't. I must thank yuh for doin' this for me. I got tuh get well for Jigger. Yuh should've seen him, ma'am. Just like a little soldier when the guns were bangin' all around him. Nobody's goin' tuh take him away from me. I owe my life tuh that kid—gettin' that bronc." He kept talking until at last his voice dropped to a mutter and Dell Bishop realized that the fever had pulled him back into delirium.

WEARY days passed before Lee Maxon could get up. When he was sitting in a chair in front of the stone fireplace for the first time, a man came in. He looked at Lee quizzically for a minute, then introduced himself.

"I'm Chet Bishop," he said. "Yuh sure got yoreself intuh somethin'. Gunnin' down Bull Gavin an' takin' the kid. Killing St. Cloud! Yuh shore started somethin', feller. It's a good thing that they figger yuh're dead. Yuh better stay that way. When yuh're up to it, I'll git the bronc an'—"

Lee's voice interrupted him. "I've got different ideas." Chet Bishop looked startled at his temerity. Lee studied the man's face and saw a vague similarity between his features and those of Dell Bishop. But there were weak lines in the brother's handsome face, a certain looseness about the mouth. The girl came in just then with her energetic personality and the convalescent turned his eyes on her.

"Chet," she exclaimed to her brother, "where've you been?"

"Oh, around. Don't yuh think it's risky business keepin' this hombre here, Dell? If the Goddards find out—I saw Ray Goddard in Waterman this morning. He—" Dell Bishop's eyes flashed a warning.

Lee looked at her for several moments before speaking. Then he said: "The kid—they got him back, Bishop?"

"Yeah. They'll keep him this time."

"Who is he?" Maxon asked. "D'yuh know him? Is everybody around here about yellow? Lettin' the Goddards treat a poor defenseless youngster like that. If he's not theirs—"

"The Goddards—father and son—run this county, Maxon. Get that into yore head," Chet Bishop clipped, wheeling to go out again. "Shelby—how's he been doin', Dell?"

"All right," the girl replied noncommittally, brushing the back of her hand across her forehead. Lee read a peculiar fear in her eyes and wondered at it. He saw her bite her lower lip as if trying to control them.

When the crunch of Chet Bishop's boots had become indistinct, Lee said to the man's sister: "I'd like tuh know about things around here, Miss Bishop." The days under her care had done something to Lee. Her voice, her slender grace, her untarnished beauty—near him for so long—had seemed to unwind something inside his being. For days he had been aware of the haunting terror that she thought she was hiding from him. Once he had noted signs of weeping about her face but had been too diffident to question her.

"You heard what Chet said," the girl said dully. "The Goddards own this county. They drove their cattle onto our range the second day you were here. They killed two of our riders, wounded our foreman, Shelby. Thaw Goddard runs Waterman. The sheriff does as he's told. You can't do a thing about—the boy, Mr. Maxon. When you're well enough—" Her voice had a tremor in it and she turned to leave the room. Lee got up quickly and reached out to put his hands on her shoulders. He swung her gently around.

"Yuh can trust me, Miss Bishop. I've got tuh know. You're holdin' something back. What is it, girl?"

Dell Bishop made no move to free herself. It was as if she realized that she had found a friend at last. After a minute she told Lee that and his spirits soared. He drew her closer.

"I'm more than that—Dell," he said gently. "Forgive me—if I speak out of turn. But ever since that day I opened my eyes and saw yuh leanin' over me—I've been in love with yuh, Dell. An' when I was out of my head, it seemed like an angel was by me."

THE girl snuggled against his rough shirt shyly. "I'm glad, Lee," she confessed. "Let me sit down. I'll tell you everything." She walked toward a chair and slumped into it. Lee Maxon knelt close and waited for her to speak.

"The Goddards found him four years ago—half starved—in a hay barn on their west pasture. There was a bad cut on his head. Chet said at the time that the boy must have been on a stage that was held up at Clearwater Creek a little while before. That slaughter, Lee—maybe you've heard of it—the worst that ever happened in this country. They were all killed—everybody—a U. S. marshal, too. A lot of money was on that stage—"

"I won't ever forget it," Lee told her, eyes growing hard, "I used to be a lawman. I knew one of the men who was shot. They shot him three times, Dell. Yeah, I'm sure the kid was on that stage. I've got reason tuh be sure. The night I found him—but go on—"

"I guess Johnny must've doubled himself up into a ball on the floor of the stage when it went over the side of the gorge," Dell Bishop resumed her recital, looking at the man strangely. "Chet and I had just come down here to start this place. Chet went over to the Goddards one day and saw the boy. He was washing himself in front of the bunkhouse. Chet saw a scar on the little fellow's arm. It was in the shape of a cross. Chet knew it well because he had put it there."

"He—what?" Maxon blurted out.

"Once Chet worked for a rancher named Hopper up in Montana," the girl explained. "Before Hopper found gold on his ranch. He had a baby just learning to walk—about eighteen or twenty months old, I guess. One day Chet saw the little fellow toddle across the yard toward a rattler. It bit the baby before Chet could shoot. Well, Chet lost no time. He just used his knife to cut the wound and sucked the poison out right then and there. That was the scar he saw. He told Goddard about it—the biggest mistake he ever made, Lee. Ever since then our lives haven't been worth living."

"I—begin—to see," Lee said slowly, a strange light of triumph burning in his eyes. His hand went into his pocket and closed over something that he carried. "They've been manhandlin' that little boy all this time—beating what memory of anything he might have carried away from Montana right out of his poor little head. Hopper—Johnny Hopper, the heir to the Hopper Mines. You knew this—you knew it, Dell, but you and Chet never let his father know!"

The girl dropped her head into her hands. "Yes, I tried to get word through to him. I sent a letter but I guess it never got there. We sent a rider, but he was killed on the trail. Just after that things began to happen to Chet. He started drinking, Lee—going around like a man in the grip of some awful fear. One night he told me—that Ray Goddard and his father had found an old leather wallet of his near the road where the stage turned over that time. Chet doesn't know how it got there but they hold it over him. It's made a wreck out of him."

"So Chet doesn't dare to call his soul his own—nor you either, Dell," Lee said. "I guess the Goddards don't let anything stand in their way. Once your brother opened his mouth, the Goddard-owned sheriff would come for him. Any hombre suspected of bein' mixed up in that slaughter would get the rope quick. Yeah, I see it all."

For a while he remained silent, his eyes narrowed and brain working feverishly. Dell looked at him once or twice, a question in her eyes. When she spoke, it was in a timid voice.

"They think you're dead, Lee. Maybe—you could ride to Hopper's Mines and tell Johnny's father that—" She left the suggestion unfinished.

"I rode through there about seven weeks ago," the man told her through compressed lips. "I was on my way down here. The Goddards sent for me."

"What?" The girl sat up as if electrified.

"Sure. I sent word down by a roundabout way that I was out of a job and lookin' for excitement. I found it, all right. When I was up there, a man committed suicide. That's what the sheriff said it was. He was lyin' on the floor with a Colt in his fist. The wound in his temple was powder-burned. I guess—Johnny's father got tired of life without his boy. He—yes, Dell, it was—"

"Johnny's father?" the girl said in

a choked whisper. Then she covered her face with her hands to blot out the picture of what she had just heard.

"Seems like things connect too well," Lee Maxon said. "I reckon I want tuh talk tuh a certain hombre. That's why I let him live up at the Circle Dot."

Dell Bishop gasped: "Who are you?"

"Why," Lee Maxon laughed brittly, "seems like I told yuh my name, Dell. All I can say now is—trust me."

"You know I do, Lee," the girl said, her eyes searching his. "I hope I always will." She swayed toward him just as the door crashed open. Chet Bishop lunged into the room, terror riding him hard.

"Hide, Maxon!" he yelled. "The Goddards are comin' here. With three men. Get intuh the closet there, Maxon—quick."

"Chet—Chet!" the girl screamed. "Take the black horse out—take it into the brush. Tell Shelby to hide the saddle. Hurry—"

CHAPTER IV

Six-Gun Court

LEE MAXON was already slamming the heavy closet door behind him. He dropped a big iron hook into place and then crouched there waiting. He didn't want the Goddards to know he was still alive. In a minute he heard voices out in the yard, the pound of hoofs against the hard-packed earth. Through a crack in the door he saw Dell Bishop standing in the middle of the room, striving valiantly to control her pale features.

When the door burst open, the girl straightened her shoulders and held her head up proudly. "I expect you to knock when you come here, Ray Goddard," she said.

Lee Maxon shifted his cramped body. He saw Ray Goddard in the room, his handsome, saturnine face twisted with a mocking smirk. His eyes appraised the girl's slender figure with insolence.

"Where's Chet?" he snapped, ignoring her remark.

"What do you want of him?"

Another man moved across the floor then and the watching Maxon saw that it was Bart Quell, the gunman with the slanting eyes. Those snakelike orbs shifted about the room restlessly. His thumbs were hooked in his gun belt, his fingers drumming with hellish energy. The concealed man saw those guns swinging low at Quell's hips, two guns with polished bone handles. He sucked in his breath and held it as Quell's eyes seemed to dart his way.

"I'll tell yuh, Dell," Ray Goddard clipped. "I want the two of yuh tuh be in Waterman tuhmorrow afternoon. We're—my mother and father—figger we'd better adopt Johnny legally seein' as how we want tuh keep him. Yore word means a lot in Waterman—about our characters." He laughed uproariously at that thrust. "You an' Chet be in town an' we'll tell yuh what tuh say. Savvy?" He whirled when a shadow fell across the boards.

"Hello, Chet," he sneered. "Dell here'll tell yuh what I want. We need a couple of character witnesses—just tuh make things look straight. Not that it matters much but it's pretty important business—adoptin' a kid."

"Yuh can't do that, Goddard," Chet burst out. "That kid hates yuh. Yuh've treated him like a dog. I won't go that far for yuh."

"Oh, yes, yuh will!"

A strained silence followed. Bart Quell broke it with a metallic laugh. It seemed to bring Dell Bishop out of a trance and she turned and stumbled out of the room. The boots of Ray Goddard and his men banged against the floorboards. The door closed behind them. Lee Maxon waited until the sound of hoofbeats had died before he unlocked the closet door and stepped out into the room. Chet Bishop looked at him. His eyes

dropped away from Lee's direct glance.

"Yuh heard them, Maxon. The devils! They've heard about his father and they're goin' tuh take him—and what belongs tuh him. They'll kill that boy. They'll beat him intuh the ground slow and sure. Nobody but Dell and me know who he is. The Goddards'll swear they didn't know until the news of his father's death conveniently comes to them a little later. It's funny about—"

Lee's voice cut in: "We think the same way, Chet. I'm goin' tuh Waterman tuhmorruh afternoon."

"Yuh're a fool, Maxon. Yuh won't have a chance."

"I'm goin' tuh stop that cold-blooded court of the Goddards. I've seen welts on that kid's back. I promised him that I would stick with him. I've got a reputation for keepin' my promises, Chet. And I don't aim tuh stand by and see a bunch of rats hold a club over yore sister. I might as well tell yuh that I love Dell, Chet. I've told her so—and she feels about the same way. Listen—how long have the Goddards been ownin' most of this range?"

"They've been buyin' it up the last few years by big slices," Chet Bishop replied. "Drivin' out nesters—killin'—burnin'. Hell, isn't there any law in this country—any law at all—anywhere?" The man's nerves were breaking. His lips shook and he clamped both hands to his head.

"An hombre came down here a couple of years back," Lee said, "to see if there was. He was on that stage, Chet, but he never got here. Seems that all the Maxons had a loco idea that there ought tuh be law everywhere out here. The man was a marshal; I knew him pretty well." Lee looked out of the window and gazed far into the distance. Momentarily his mild eyes glistened.

CHET BISHOP looked at him curiously. Suddenly he thrust out his jaw and a burning light flashed in his eyes. "I'm sick of bein' hounded," he clipped. "I'm fed up with bein' stepped on like a dog. Better tuh go out by a bullet than stand life livin' like a cur. Lee, I'm goin' intuh Waterman, but it won't be tuh be a mouthpiece for the damn' Goddards! D'yuh hear? I used tuh be a man once—lookin' at you makes me feel ashamed. Well—"

Dell Bishop came into the room, face as pale as the white lace collar of her blue dress. "No—no—Chet! They'd kill you if—"

"He don't go with me," Lee said to her. "I go alone."

"Like hell!"

"Yuh heard me, Chet," the rider from up north bit out. He wheeled and went out of the house.

Lee Maxon rode toward the town of Waterman next day with myriad thoughts milling in his brain. The trail seemed to consume hours but it was not so long before he was dipping down into the town along a powdery slope. Quickly his eyes flitted over the ragged rows of buildings, the saloon with its big false front, the little church steeple, the schoolhouse. Before the last-named building a crowd was gathered like ants around a morsel of bread.

The rider dismounted at the hitch-rack that was strung along the walk for almost a hundred feet. Men stared at him. One whispered hoarsely and wheeled away from him. The word spread. Hawk-eyed individuals began to seep out of the crowd around the schoolhouse and move toward the planked walk. A lawman to whom some one had pointed Maxon out blocked the newcomer's way as he turned from his black bronc.

"Yuh've got a nerve tuh come here, Maxon," the man said. "The Goddards'll crack down on yuh for that shootin' out at the Circle Dot. They'll put a price on yore head!"

"It was a fair fight, Sheriff," Lee retorted. "They tried tuh murder me. Anyway, I'm supposed tuh be dead.

The price isn't on my head yet, and I've got all the time I want."

"Yuh better come with me, Maxon. Give me those guns! I'm takin' yuh for the murder of Bill Gavin, Goddard's foreman."

"I see," the rider slurred, "yuh can't even run yore own office, huh? Yuh know what happened out there—yuh know damn' well yuh don't want tuh lock me up! But yuh're afraid of the Goddards, too."

The sheriff's face blanched and his eyes strayed from the two that sought to probe deep into his soul. He spat out: "All right, go along, Maxon. Yuh'll git riddled with lead." He wheeled and slanted across the street.

Maxon headed toward the vortex of confusion. Swiftly his eyes swept the faces of the men milling in the street as he walked up to the schoolhouse. On the threshold he stool still. Thaw Goddard was holding court. Lee remembered him well, although the man was much older and harder looking than in the years gone by.

Ray was at his father's elbow, an arrogant smirk on his face. A gunman whom Lee Maxon knew only as Carver stood not far from the central figures. Bart Quell was just behind the younger Goddard. Lee faded to the side and screened himself behind a tight group of peaceful citizens. Thaw Goddard was banging the table in front of him with a powerful, horny fist.

"Court's in order!" he thundered authoritatively. "Everybody quiet." His eyes moved over the crowd and he mauled his black beard reflectively. Suddenly his eyes darted toward where Lee was standing when a high-pitched, querulous voice ripped through the close, hot interior of the schoolhouse.

IT was then that Lee saw little Jigger. The boy was breaking loose from Mrs. Goddard's restraining hold. Ray Goddard reached out, gripped the boy by the arm and spun him around. He looked toward the door, then, and at sight of Lee Maxon stiffened perceptibly. His face drained of blood, he let out a hoarse shout.

"What're yuh doin' here, Maxon? Yuh shore got a nerve. We want yuh for a killin' or two. Bull Gavin—St. Cloud!"

Bart Quell's face had become as bloodless as that of a man long dead. He slunk across the platform, slant-eyes deadly.

"I've come for the boy, Goddard," Lee thundered, striding down the aisle. Rage was driving sane reasoning from him. Roused like he was, he was past realizing that a bullet could kill him. He was following a mad impulse that hammered at his brain and goaded him on.

"Lee—go back—don't come any closer!" The scream came from the gray-haired and down-trodden woman who was wife and mother of the paramount figures on the stage. "If this is your boy, I want you to have him. I didn't know—" She swung her eyes, clouded with terror, away from Lee's face to that of her son. "Ray—don't!"

But her son was already drawing guns from the tied-down holsters at his sides. Their barrels flashed in the sunlight streaming through the window. Jigger cried out with terror when the man known to Lee as Carver ripped his Colt loose. A stripe of fire, a deafening roar, and the gunman staggered backward. Blood spurted from a hole in his chest and his six-gun fell at Thaw Goddard's feet. The gray-haired little woman hugged Jigger close and shielded his small body with her own during the red hell that ensued.

Lee Maxon was in the aisle, backing away, his Colts beating out a pulsating tattoo of sound. A Coltman near Goddard pitched forward; his head crashed sickeningly against the edge of the table. Ray Goddard sent the table tumbling onto its side and used it as a shield for himself as he threw lead. Lee was more sane now

and sensed his doom. Six against one inside the house; Circle Dot guns out at the door! Stalemate. He had been a reckless fool, he assailed himself bitterly.

A bullet cut close to his neck and his eyes were blinded for a flashing moment. Just time enough for death to leap in. He heard a voice cut in on the hell. The crash of a Colt over on the other side of the room. His vision cleared and he saw Chet Bishop propped up against the window sill, firing coolly, deliberately into the room. A man near Thaw Goddard tumbled to the floor as if every bone in his body had become rubber. Another cursed crazily and staggered sidewise, fingers clamped to his side. Bart Quell was sidling away, going out through a back door.

"I've got five more shots, Lee!" Chet roared. "Git over here an' dive through. The bronc is out there. I'll hold 'em—" He took two more shots toward the platform and Lee Maxon tore for the window. Some one clawed at his legs and he gave the fellow the full force of his boot in the face.

"Chet, yuh fool!" he raged.

"I figgered I owed the world somethin'," the crazed young Bishop yelled when Lee was climbing through the window. "Dell sent me!"

"Come on, boy!" Lee yelled at his rescuer, launching his body through. "Yuh can't waste another—" His feet on the ground, he whirled to give Bishop a hand, but Chet was sagging and, as he went, his face held a grin for Lee.

"Ride—yuh son-of-a—gun. Ride! I—I reckon I've got tuh stay." His face went blank with death and slipped down out of sight. There was nothing in the window of the schoolroom but drifting gunsmoke.

Lee tore for his horse. Just before he swung himself to the saddle he whirled and blazed three bullets at a corner of the schoolhouse. He saw Bart Quell pitch forward on his face and roll behind the shelter of an oak tree trunk. The man's mad cursing was in the fugitive's ears as he rode away, his rowels raking the black's flanks thoughtlessly. He looked back and an icy laugh rolled from his lips. But the hurt eyes of Jigger haunted him. From every side of the dugway down which the horse was racing the small boy's eyes, full of bewilderment, seemed to be peering at him.

"I'll be back, kid!" the rider hurled into the teeth of the wind. "They won't hold ontuh yuh long." He thought of Joe St. Cloud. Then of Bart Quell. Other gunmen whose faces he had seen at intervals along the trail of his career as a lawman. All in a bunch—with the Goddards. It must add up to something. That little piece of stuff he carried in his pocket was the key to the grim enigma, the thing that would blast affairs wide open with greater force than a stick of dynamite.

CHAPTER V

Hellbent for Boot Hill

LEE thought of another man who had gone down into the Goddard domain to look into the killing of a dozen men. He had been on that stage that lobos in human form had met and turned the scene into a massacre from which none survived but little Johnny Hopper—Jigger, to Lee Maxon. That little boy's survival was going to be a boomerang to the Goddards. Bill Maxon—Lee could see his father's body now—had been taken back to a little town up over the Utah line. The undertaker had tried to fill out the holes in the waxen face. In his clothes Lee Maxon had found a marshal's badge.

Hours later the rider was deep in the river bottoms, still heading north toward the border. Night came on but the black bronc kept on.

Back at the Slash O, Dell Bishop was burying her dead. The ranch foreman, Jay Shelby, two punchers and a parson from Waterman made

up the grim party. After the burial service, the girl stumbled into the shadows of the great oaks and slumped in a despairing heap on the ranch-house steps. After a while she lifted her grief-stricken face to look at Shelby.

"He—he didn't come back," she sobbed.

"Reckon he's doin' the wisest thing—if he's alive," the grizzled cowman said. "He was plumb reckless tuh try an' pull a stunt like that—because of a kid. His life won't be worth a plugged nickel around here. If he can git away from that bunch of lobos on his trail—"

"But he—wouldn't just ride away and forget me—like that," the girl protested.

Shelby drew in his breath. "Reckon not, Dell. No man could. I didn't know it was like that. Nope—if I was the man, I'd come back through hell an' high water."

Three days went by and no trace of Lee Maxon was found. Goddard's posse came in after a thirty-six hour chase of the man who had disrupted their court. Thaw Goddard put a price of five thousand dollars on the fugitive's head—for murder and attempted abduction. Bart Quell haunted Waterman, hard slanting eyes searching hungrily for the man who had bested him. On the fourth day horsemen began to trickle into town singly and in pairs. It was the day on which Thaw Goddard had arranged to carry on with the legal adoption of one Johnny Doe. A nervous tension gripped the town. Coltmen moved about like wraiths, scrutinizing every strange face, listening. Ray Goddard rode into town with Quell and three of the Circle Dot riders.

At the hitchrack he said: "Yuh all watch close. If that hombre comes in—I've got a feeling." He went into the saloon and drank greedily. His fingers shook on the glass. Suddenly the slatted swinging doors swung inward and his father stamped in, eyeing his son obliquely.

"That's enough of that stuff, Ray. Come on out of here," he bellowed. He leaned forward, the eyes in his shaggy head probing. "What yuh shakin' for? What ails yuh, huh?"

"I've got a feelin' that that hombre—I saw men out there—strangers tuh this county. I—"

Thaw Goddard's laugh boomed out. "He won't git within a mile of this town. He'll git plugged if he does. The trails are watched. Every man knows his job for the next three hours. Git on out. It's time tuh start things goin'. She bring the kid in?"

"She's bringin' him," Ray clipped, reeling out. His eyes swept the streets hurriedly. He pulled himself together, laughed uncertainly at his own wild misgivings. The place was alive with Circle Dot guns.

THAW GODDARD once more was holding court. Ten minutes passed and the farcial proceedings went on without an interruption. Small Johnny sat with the gray-haired little woman, chattel of the Goddards, his pinched face clouded with fear. He watched Thaw Goddard raise a legal looking paper and his tiny face crumpled up as if he were going to cry. The man was about to speak when gunfire began to break and roll along the street outside.

"What was that?"

Bart Quell stiffened and ran to a window. Ray Goddard choked out something incoherent. But it was the lawman of Waterman who saw Lee Maxon first. He stood in the shadows of the Waterman jail and cursed softly.

"Yuh fool! Yuh damned fool! But if I was only half the man you are, Maxon, I'd—" He wheeled suddenly and strode through a side door. Inside his office he froze by the window, weak and trembling. He saw three men close in around the man on whose head there was a price. One of them suddenly fired a shot at the mouth of

an areaway across the street. The head and shoulders of a Coltman subsequently pitched forward, clawing fingers groveling in the dust.

Men yelled crazily as Lee Maxon made his way toward the Queen High. Four horsemen moved in as if by magic and covered him from the street. The sheriff saw the lean rider slant quickly across the warped planks of the sidewalks and fade through the smoky rectangle of light that was the door of the saloon.

In the Goddard court a stunned silence gripped those gathered there when a man burst through the door and cried out: "Maxon's here—in the Queen High!"

Bart Quell burst away from the platform, a wicked grin splitting his Mongolian countenance. Thaw Goddard yelled at the case-hardened men who formed a cordon around him. Then all of them barged out of the rear door. The crowd became a mad, unthinking mob, fighting to reach the street. At the turn of events little Jigger tried to get loose from Mrs. Goddard's restraining hand.

"Don't go out—son. Wait—wait! There'll be more killin's, son. Oh, God, help Lee! He's right—my kin are wrong. The Goddards have been wrong a long time now." She sobbed hysterically and covered her careworn face with her gnarled hands. Something of her feeling communicated itself to the little boy and he knelt down beside her.

"Please—please, God—watch out for him. He's—the best friend I've got. He's come for me. Don't let him die—please, Lord!"

Ray Goddard lunged into the Queen High first. He stopped short, took a sliding backward step when his quick, infuriated glance took in every detail of the scene that confronted him.

Four Goddard gunmen were boxed by men alien to Waterman. Their startled eyes tried to flash a message to the Circle Dot boss but Quell's sluggish brain did not interpret the warning quickly. Eyes flashing hellfire, he passed Ray Goddard and took a deadly stance in front of Lee Maxon.

Lee said slowly: "I've been waitin' for yuh, Quell. This killin' skunk is never far away from yuh, is he, Ray?" he tossed back to the younger Goddard over the gunman's head. "Come on in, yuh low-down skunks. I want all of yuh tuh get it on this play."

"We'll give yuh thirty seconds tuh live!" It was Thaw Goddard's voice that boomed the ultimatum through the skirling tobacco smoke.

Lee Maxon laughed mirthlessly and took a step forward. "Yuh seem tuh sleep with them wolves of yourn at hand, Goddard," he sneered. "I reckon a man must feel pretty small not tuh be able tuh trust his skin tuh the guns he packs himself."

Thaw Goddard's big frame shook as if struck by a heavy iron bar. "What're yuh waitin' for, Quell?" he thundered. "We come in here tuh drill that skunk full of lead. Let's get goin'."

A MAN, stranger to Waterman, stepped into view then. He whipped back the skirt of his vest and showed the Circle Dot contingent a gleaming badge.

"Reckon yuh've had things too much tuh yoreselves in this part of the country," he clipped. "That isn't a tin badge, Goddard. It's a U. S. marshal's badge. Lee Maxon will start this little powwow himself—not any of you lobos. Fire ahead, Lee!"

The elder Goddard's face became a little white above the bushy black beard. Bart Quell slid his tongue along lips that had become dry. He swept his snaky eyes over the smoke-filled room. Half a dozen men were staring at him stonily.

He ripped out: "So yuh fooled the lawmen, huh Maxon? Maybe they don't know yuh killed Joe St. Cloud? Three other Goddard riders, too. I don't git the drift—I—"

"Yuh wouldn't," Lee Maxon bit out. Then: "Cover these skunks," he said to the men surrounding him. "I'm takin' a look at Bart Quell's guns." He leaped away from the bar and crashed into the gunman. With a quick wrench he had ripped a bone-handled Colt loose from Quell's holster and backed away.

A man in the doorway pulled a six-gun. From one corner of the bar licked out a stab of flame. The roar of gunpowder filled the Queen High and deafened eardrums. A Circle Dot man spun halfway around and crashed out through the swinging doors.

Ray Goddard cracked: "What kind of a throw-down is this? That man there—he's a killer. And right now he's hellbent for boot hill."

Maxon laughed and held something up for all to see. "I kind of had a hunch, folks. Up in Montana they found a gent who was supposed to have killed himself. He had a gun in his hand but it had a black handle. Funny this bit of polished bone should have been found on the floor beside him, though. And it just fits Bart Quell's Colt that I've just taken off him. It seems Quell had tuh get out of Hopper's office through the window. He couldn't go through the door because he left it locked on the inside to make it look suicide for sure. He banged the catch on the window loose with the handle of his gun before he could slide it open. That was when he broke the piece off."

"It's a lie. It's a lie! I never was—" Bart Quell had shrieked the denial, slanting toward Ray Goddard.

Lee Maxon's voice went on mercilessly: "Yuh killed him because yuh was hired to. Because that kid the Goddards started tuh adopt was a Hopper—Johnny Hopper. The poor little kid who crawled away from that stage slaughter a few years back. There was a U. S. marshal on that stage—Bill Maxon, my father. He was killed. That's one reason why I'm down here.

"I got tuh wonderin' how the Goddards started off ranching with such a bang these past three or four years. There was a lot of money on that stage. Now they need more money, huh? Their eyes are on what the kid inherits. Yuh killed his father—Johnny couldn't be heir to a living father. Maybe yuh could tell a lot of other things before yuh hang, huh, Quell?"

Men began to scatter. They seemed to feel that Bart Quell was about to strike.

"You Goddards—yuh sent for me," Lee Maxon flung at the father and son. "I saw tuh that. I wanted tuh get close tuh the Circle Dot. I heard every killin' skunk in two states was on yore payroll so I came down tuh find out why. I came down tuh ask Bart Quell what he was doin' in Hopper's Mines that night—the night that Johnny's father was supposed to have shot himself. A man spotted that ugly Mongolian face—"

"Shoot, Quell!" Ray Goddard screamed.

THE killer was striking before the words were out. Thaw Goddard had thundered a kindred order to the gunman but it was drowned by the crashing report of Lee Maxon's Colts. The detonations filled the saloon to bursting. Hangers-on went sprawling for cover. Lee saw Bart Quell buckle as the slugs hit. He weaved toward the bar when a long-faced gunman took up the downed killer's fight. Behind him Lee heard Thaw Goddard curse as his gun spun away from his fingers and clattered to the boards. He fetched up against a great wooden post, lips trickling blood, a surprised expression spreading over his face. Orange flame spurted from the heavy forty-fives of the man who had struck the elder Goddard aside. A star badge was on the shirt of this new fighter.

Lee felt something strike against

him hard and he was driven back toward the door. Bart Quell was up again, teeth clenched tight to hold back a rush of blood. The gunman's eyes were Satanic and carried by the fear of death. He tried to fire but his arms sagged. On wavering legs his body revolved like a ludicrous toy and the blood gushed through his lips to stain the front of his shirt. An instant later he crumpled to the floor.

Propped against the bar with one leg shattered, the long-faced killer fired a slug that burned Maxon's arm. Lee swung his Colt that way with deadly speed and lead pierced the gunman's body. Behind the falling Coltman he caught a glimpse of Ray Goddard in the powdersmoke. A desperate gleam was in the man's eyes, brighter than the glint of light on the bluish barrel of his Colt. When Lee stumbled over the body of Bart Quell and went to his knees, a savage, exultant yell broke from Goddard. It was smothered, however, when a bullet hit him in the face and ploughed through to the base of his skull. Maxon swung around and saw the lawman standing kneedeep in smoke.

"Thanks," he forced out breathlessly, stumbling toward the sheriff. "I reckoned yuh was on the other side."

"When a man sees a chance tuh grab for the self-respect he's plumb give away," the lawman yelled, "well, he—" The shout was arrested midway by the powerful impact of Lee Maxon's body. Thaw Goddard, firing from behind, sent a bullet whistling through the open door of the saloon. Lee had seen it coming. From his prone position he pumped lead at the desperate owner of the Circle Dot as the elder Goddard swung from his shelter to take second aim. The defender of the Hopper cause watched warily as Thaw Goddard coughed and, dropping his Colt, came walking across the floor like a cat approaching something dangerous. The man's great legs were bending under him.

"Yuh hellion—figger—that ends—everythin'—". His glassy eyes fell away from Lee Maxon. He turned halfway around and fell in a heap across the body of Bart Quell.

A strained silence hung in the air for a moment, then men began to filter in through the doorway. Their faces were white masks in the sickly light as they stared open-mouthed at the two grim figures that remained standing. They saw Lee drop close to Thaw Goddard whose lips were moving.

"Yuh tagged — it right — boy — Johnny Hopper. Wanted him—make up my losses—things was goin'—out from under—me. Quell—we sent him tuh kill Hopper. Got our start—knocking off that stage—" His lower jaw sagged and a film began to smother the life in his eyes. He died with his hands clawing the floor where Bart Quell's life blood was trickling across the boards.

CHAPTER VI

Silent Sixes

MEN stepped aside, stunned that anyone could leave the bullet-riddled place alive, when Lee Maxon reeled out of the saloon. A smile rested on the pallid face of the lawman who followed him out. Blood was oozing from the sheriff's sleeve and dripping from the tips of his fingers but he did not seem to care. He was a man who had suddenly dropped a yoke from his shoulders. Pride burned in his eyes because he could walk beside this young stranger who had set things right in Waterman.

Lee Maxon leaned up against the hitchrack, his fingers groping at the wound in his shoulder. He brought them away and looked at the crimson stains with a grin.

Behind him a voice whispered, awed: "A marshal—the son-of-a gun!"

Some one jerked at Maxon's sleeve. He looked down into the face of Johnny Hopper. The little boy's eyes

were brimming with tears of stark relief.

"Lee," he cried, "yuh did it for me!"

"Yuh had a lot tuh do with it, son," the young marshal said. "A heap." He drew the little lad close. "I promised yuh, didn't I? We're stickin' tuh-gether now—and always. Nobody'll ever take yuh away."

The voice of Mrs. Goddard confirmed that from nearby. "That's right, Lee. He's yours. Take him."

Lee saw her then, a shrunken little human being whose eyes were stark with the tragedy of it all. But there was a strange smile on her pale, thin lips. A certain freedom tempered the sorrow.

"They deserved—to go, Lee. They sinned. I wish," her voice broke a little, "that Ray could've been like you. I don't blame you, Lee. Remember that—always." Her voice trailed to a whisper. Lee reached out and stopped her when she turned to go.

"I—I'm sorry, ma'am," he said, "that it had tuh be me. I've never forgotten how kind yuh were tuh me. It don't—seem—real—what's happened. Believe me, ma'am, I—I—"

A wan smile on her face, she moved away, a bit of human dust, a numbed expression in her sunken eyes. As she moved into the shadows beyond the areas of light, Lee for the first time felt acutely the deepening silence that had fallen upon the town in the wake of the gun storm. A town emotionally exhausted. Shock was on the stark faces that swam around him. Blood trickled out over the sill of the Queen High.

"Come on, Jigger, let's ride out of here." Lee took the little boy's hand in his. He thought of what a man had told him up close to the border.

"Hopper? He didn't leave a cent, Maxon. Everythin' he had went into the mine. Whatever he took out went into a faro bank. Poor cuss never cared much about anythin' after his kid was lost. A man was takin' the kid down to Nevada tuh stay with his aunt an' he just disappeared. The man's body was in that stage massacre but the boy must've been washed downstream in the gorge where the stage dropped into the ravine. They closed out on him at the mine—syndicate from the East took it over. Don't blame him for committin' suicide."

THE SLASH O buildings were engulfed in an awesome stillness when Lee Maxon rode in with the boy. Jay Shelby sat in the bunkhouse door staring out across the yard. Lee dismounted stiffly and looked at the puncher, eyes holding a question. The man nodded.

"She's out at Chet's grave, Maxon."

The rider sucked in his breath and walked toward that grove of trees, Johnny following at his heels. When they drew near the little Slash-O burying ground, Lee saw Dell kneeling on the grass, her hands covering her face. He drew near and placed a hand on the girl's shoulder. She looked up, startled at first, then realizing who it was caught his hand thankfully.

"Lee—Lee—I—" Her tear-streaked face pressed against the hand which so recently had blasted out the lives of the Goddards.

"I've come back, Dell," he said, gathering her close.

She clung to him fiercely, sobbing: "I'm so—alone, Lee."

"He died for me," the man said feelingly. "Whatever he did—was—he made up for everything. We can't do anything for him now. Jigger's waitin' tuh have yuh say 'hello,' honey."

The girl seemed not to have heard. "Shelby told me—he rode in a few minutes ago, Lee."

Maxon's face hardened at the recollection. "They're gone, Dell—both of 'em. Quell, too. They sounded their own doom by chasing a will-o'-the-wisp. Hopper owned nothing when he died. I only wish I had told them—before they went out. It would have

made the trail into hell a rougher one." Suddenly he raised the girl's chin and said: "Dell, yuh don't seem happy tuh see me—and Jigger."

"You know I am," she said chokingly. One of her brown hands reached out to the wondering little boy and he clutched at it. Then she leaned over him and lay her cheek against his tousled head. "Lee," she said, looking up at the man, "you're not a rancher. Shelby says you're a marshal, Lee, and you'll be going away." Her voice stretched thin to cover the ache in her heart. At the last word it failed utterly.

The little boy said trustfully: "He promised we'd stick tuhgether, ma'am. Let me talk tuh him."

Lee Maxon smiled faintly. "I reckon I haven't been much of a rancher," he said, "because I never had a ranch. I'd be willing tuh learn—if yuh'd ask me, Dell. I could turn my badge in."

The girl looked up at him, her face an oval of shining gladness in the dusk. "Lee," she said, "you're home. Tell me that you want to stay?" Her fingers rested on his sleeve and strayed upward. Lee Maxon felt that everything in the world was all right when Dell Bishop's soft, sun-kissed arms stole around his neck.

"It didn't seem possible that it could happen tuh me," he murmured. "A girl like—" Warm lips pressed against his mouth smothered the words.

From the ranchyard Jay Shelby saw little Johnny Hopper's shadowy figure merge with those other two so closely knitted together. He turned and walked away, a happy whistle hovering on his lips. For the first time in several years he realized that peace had come to the Slash O and that it had come to take up permanent residence.

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Sam Taylor was doomed to the noose—so he decided to try

Boomerang Justice

By Jack Sterrett

SAM TAYLOR jogged gloomily along the road which wound through the Arroyo Negro, blackest spot in those weird, black canyons which leap up into the ranges of the Caliente foothills. He had lost heavily at monte in the cowtown of Rawhide. Sam tried singing to raise his spirits. With a grin for his folly, he chose an appropriate tune.

"For I'm a young cowboy and I know I done wro—!"

Suddenly, Sam's song was cut off. He jerked his horse to a halt. Around the next bend, had come the muffled report of a shot, followed now by a whole fusillade of six-gun talk, angry and grumbling. Sam heard a crash and, as he listened, there came the scream of a horse, more shots, and the terrified yell of a man. Instantly, Sam was up in the stirrups, forty-five in hand, and charging.

He burst around the bend. One glance told the story. A wrecked stagecoach lay on its side in the road, some of its horses still struggling, others quiet and sprawled. Two men were tumbled in the road, obviously the driver and the guard. Obviously, also, they were quite dead. A couple of men in masks were searching the stage. Six-guns fogging, they scattered and ran for their horses in the darkness as Sam charged.

Sam thumbed his forty-five viciously at the black shadows, and flaming whip-lashes bit reply. He was hit hard in the left shoulder, twisted from the saddle and flung to the ground. Instantly, he was on his feet, reloading with savage speed and flipping up the barrel of his gun again as he ran for the protection of the wrecked stage.

The big forty-five stabbed flame, bucking and thundering in his fist. He lost sight of one outlaw but one of his shots got the other through the heart just as he heard the roar of hoofs behind him and something struck the top of his skull, flooding his brain with fire. He pitched into a lake of oblivion. Down—down, with an angry buzzing of hornets in his ears.

The buzzing increased to a roaring. As in a nightmare, Sam struggled. He awoke to find himself in a boxlike cell of a cage with iron bars for a window. He groaned and rolled away from the thudding pain in his side and became conscious of a swinging, booted foot. He fought it, sprawled away from it and struggled to his feet. Staggering backwards, he tripped and collapsed on an iron cot. He stared up into the leering, snarling face of a tall man who wore a star on his vest.

In a few seconds, the roaring in Sam's head steadied down and he could make himself understand what Sheriff Harker was saying.

"Heck!" Sam yelped. "I didn't rob that stage!"

"You did," the black-mustached sheriff snarled. "What's more, you committed a double murder in doing it."

Sam closed his mouth and stared fixedly at the tall sheriff's ugly features. This was either a terrible mistake or a deliberate frame-up. It began to look like the latter. Harker was not a popular sheriff. His term of of-

fice soon expired and his chances for re-election depended chiefly upon some spectacular action—such as capturing the outlaw responsible for the holdup of the Caliente gold-coach.

Yes, Sam thought—frame-up and no mistake. His eyes were fixed on the fantastic gun which hung at the sheriff's thigh—the long barrel cut from a thirty-thirty rifle, the revolving chamber bored to fit and loaded with silver-jacketed bullets. The sheriff claimed to be a marvelous shot with that gun and always had it shoved around in prominent view.

"Framing me, are you, Harker?" Sam drawled. "Anxious to be re-elected at any cost?"

THE sheriff's lips writhed away from long, yellow teeth. His right hand twitched as though he would draw his queer gun. With an explosive curse, he suddenly stepped through the grated door and closed it with a clang. "Sam Taylor," he rasped, "you're no good. You've thrown away your ranch at monte and everybody knows it. You were desperate last night. By hell, you'll hang!"

For the first time, as the hard-faced man strode away, Sam realized the real seriousness of the situation.

The trial was sped through swiftly. With Harker steering things, Sam had no chance. Not that he tried to put up any fight. Astonishingly, he even signed a confession and his attitude marked him as a guilty man. A jury was drawn quickly and the trial ended swiftly. Bitterly, Sam's lawyer tried to argue with him.

"What's the big idea?" little Joe Brill protested in Sam's cell. "Anybody'd think you was anxious to get yourself hung."

Sam grinned. "Joe, signing that confession put Harker off his guard and hurried the trial through without too much investigation. Don't worry. I won't hang."

"Heck!" The little attorney perspired. "I fully expect to see your heels fan the breeze. You underestimate Harker. What was Dutch Schmidt doing here when I came in?"

Sam grinned again. "Dutch Schmidt," he said, "is owner of the gold-coach lines, isn't he?"

"Sure! Everybody knows that. But it wasn't necessary for him to attend the trial. How can he help you?"

"Come to the execution, Joe, and find out," Sam smiled. Suddenly, he was intensely serious. "Listen, Joe—just leave it all to me. But don't fail to make the plans I asked you for."

His eyes watched the jailer and, in an instant when the man was not looking, he quickly slipped something into a pocket of Joe's coat. "Don't look now," he hissed, "and be sure to bring that to the hanging. It's my life you hold—or maybe the sheriff's!"

THERE was a big crowd in the jail yard to witness the hanging. Looking from the window of his cell, Sam could see the little attorney, Joe Brill, and the tall Dutchman, Schmidt.

Walking calmly and steadily, Sam stepped out into the yard with Sheriff Harker and a deputy. His hands were bound.

Sam climbed the scaffold unassisted. He stared into Harker's eyes as he prepared to adjust the noose.

Harker's eyes flicked away from his steady stare. "Is there anything you have to say before I adjust this noose and send you to your death?"

"Yes," Sam replied, "I have something to say. But not as a condemned man going to his death. This isn't my day to hang—it's *yours!* I'm not the murderer of the gold-coach guards—*you* are—you and the dead pard whose body you carted away!"

Harker stepped back as though struck. For an instant, his face was ghastly, his eyes darting. Then, the purple blood poured back into his features as he jerked that queer, foolish gun from his thigh and lifted it as though to smash it into the bound man's face. Oddly, Sam was not even watching him, but was staring fixedly toward the door to the jail yard.

"By hell," Harker roared, "that's too much from you!"

"Hold on!" Sam stopped him as he stepped forward in threatening fury. "Take another step and you die where you stand. There's a posse of armed cowboys surrounding this jail and in possession of your office."

Harker flung an uncertain glance toward the door to the jail. A white-faced deputy stood there, moving figures behind him. The deputy nodded. "Hell," the deputy croaked, "they was in on me afore I knowed, almost."

Harker saw enough to know that there were a half-dozen guns aimed at his head. He glared at Sam. "What's the meaning of this?" he roared in helpless fury. "You're obstructing the law."

"No, I'm only giving it a chance to hang the right man. I'm giving it a chance, right now, to try, to convict and to hang—Sheriff Jim Harker!"

Harker jerked up the long barrel of his gun. But he remembered those half-seen figures behind the white-faced deputy and, slowly, he returned the odd weapon to its holster while his ugly features writhed in hate. "Do you know what you're saying?" he asked harshly.

The crowd was beginning to mutter, to surge angrily, impatient with the delay and angry at the threat of armed intervention.

"Wait!" Sam shouted and, for a moment, his face commanded attention. "Joe Brill, come on up here."

Joe forced his way through the crowd with difficulty, reached the scaffold, climbed up a step or two and then turned and faced the mob, holding high in one hand a tiny, gleaming object that flashed in the sun. As the cattlemen gazed and began to wonder, Sam's voice rang high. "Look at it, gents! I got it the night of the gold-coach holdup. I got it in the shoulder from an outlaw's gun. It's the bullet I dug out of my shoulder with my fingers, the morning after I was jailed. Look at it! Any one of you can swear to it. It's a thirty-thirty slug, coated with silver, and it was fired from a six-gun!"

The crowd turned. Every eye was fixed on that silly gun, strapped to Harker's thigh. Harker's face was white and twisted, his lips writhing. For a moment, the emotion of the mob hung in the balance, ready to turn its wrath either way and, in that moment, San's voice rang out again.

"Harker, you claim that the dying gold-coach guard said it was me who pulled that holdup. He could have been mistaken—that's possible, isn't it? What was it, exactly, that he told you before he died?"

The pallid-faced sheriff hesitated. His eyes darted through the muttering, angry mob of cattlemen and reckless cowboys. His voice came out croakingly. "He said— Hell, how can I remember exactly what he said?"

There was a rising rumble of threat from the crowd. "What did he say?" Sam shouted.

"He said—" the sheriff faltered, "He said: 'Sheriff, I been shot. I'll die. It was a man on a buckskin horse, a man with a yellow bandanna, maybe it was Sam Taylor."

Astonishingly, Sam laughed. He turned and searched the crowd. "Dutch—Dutch Schmidt! Tell 'em."

The crowd hushed as a tall, tow-headed man stepped forward. They all knew and respected him as the owner of the gold-coach lines.

"I vant to tell you," Schmidt said in broken English, "de driver of de stage vas Dummy Martin. He can't speak since he vas liddle boy but he vas damn goot driver. And de guard," Schmidt paused, "—he vas my cousin and he only been here a veek. Hans—he couldn't speak a vord of English!" He shrugged. "But maybe de sheriff can speak Dutch, no?"

There was a scream from Sheriff Harker. He snatched for his gun but Sam, arms bound, kicked out savagely with one of his feet and the ugly sheriff was pitched from the scaffold, straight down, into the arms of the roaring crowd.

Redemption Rope

By

W. Ryerson Johnson

Author of "Stacked Justice," "Comrades of the Colt," etc.

Strap Martin was plenty riled because Hayfork Hawtrey would rather do lasso tricks than help in their gold mine. But the day came when they had only that rope against a blood-mad killer—and the rope was scorched by the fires of hell.

STRAP MARTIN heard those footfalls gibbering through the mine tunnel. But he didn't look up—just kept biting his pick into the brittle chloride ore.

He knew how the echoes were in here. It would be a good two minutes before those footfalls were as close as they sounded. Several places in this two-man mine the echoes picked up a sound and did tricks with it, garbled it, or flung it far down the drift.

At the end of two minutes Strap *did* look up—so suddenly that he whacked his head against the low roof. It was a jarring blow. He saw stars. But before he saw stars he saw his rockpick actually leap from his hand and disappear in the darkness!

There was just one reason why a pick would get up and walk out of a

man's hand. The reason was Strap's partner, lanky, spindle legged, fun-loving Hay-fork Hartley.

"H a w-h a w!" Hay-fork horse-laughed. He came forward, gathering in a diminutive rawhide lasso. "You looked so funny when I yanked the pick. I'm gettin' good, huh? I snaked in at twenty feet this time."

Strap's bump on the head was still floating long-tailed comets in front of his eyes. He was in no mood to appreciate his partner's brand of humor.

"Hay-fork," he roared, "the next time you dab that loop on me I'm crammin' it down your throat! If you're so damn funny why don't you join a circus—"

"Aw, Strap—" Hay-fork protested, chuckling.

"Listen, you brought in them prospect samples yet?"

"No, I ain't got around to it yet—"

"Well, why haven't you? Is this a gold-minin' partnership or a rope-throwin' contest? I'm gettin' plum weary your horsin' around!"

A man couldn't rightly get mad at Hay-fork. Not for long. He was such a cheerful cuss along with his tomfoolery. After Hay-fork had gone and Strap was working again by himself he couldn't help grinning at the way the pick had leaped out of his hand.

It was perhaps two hours later that approaching footfalls gibbered again through the mine tunnel. Strap knew who it would be. His partner was the only other man within forty miles of this Pancake Mountain Mine. Strap kept clanging his pick into the high-grade while the footfalls echoed weirdly closer.

THE foot-scufflings ended and a harsh voice spoke. It was certainly a long skip and jump from Hay-fork's voice. Strap looked up so quickly that he came near to running the pick through the toe of his boot.

The voice had said: "Empty your hands, Martin, and claw you some roof rock!"

Strap stared, with hands held away from his sides, palms outward. The oil lamp in his cap threw its yellow beam on a man he had never seen before.

That was what Strap thought at first, that he had never seen this man with the hulking shoulders that threatened to burst through an ill-fitting coat, with the slack face so white it looked unreal, and with the thick hand wrapped around a six-gun.

"You don't know me, huh?" the man jerked. "It's on account my white face, I reckon." He laughed harshly—horribly. "Society ladies pays good dinero to git a milk-tone complexion like what I got. Me, I paid five years fer it. Five years in hell!"

Strap knew him then.

"Bat Rance! I thought—"

"You thought five years was only a starter, didn't you?"

"You were sent up for life!"

"Thanks to you and that scabby partner of yourn."

"We only testified to what we seen. We seen you kill old man Summerfield with a bullet through the back, and we so stated."

"That was enough to send me to hell. But now and ag'in a man breaks outta the gray house. I come straight to you, Martin. You know why?"

Bat Rance's fingers tightened on the six-gun and he laughed again, that toneless horrible way. The tunnel echoes took up the sound, turned it into a ghoulish clacking.

He said: "I'm gettin' a better break'n I figgered. I see I'm inheritin' me a gold mine! Since when did you swap a lasso for a pick?"

Strap answered quietly, "Hay-fork and me hazed out from the Rockin'-L a couple years ago and opened us up this mine."

The gulcher's eyes were glinting black coals against his chalky face. "You oughta took a lotta stuff outta here in two years."

"Sure."

"Where is it? And you won't gain anything by trying to fool me."

"It's in its usual place. Under the floor in our shack." Strap told the truth because he knew Rance would find it, anyway.

"Let's get goin'. This place gives me the cell-room creeps. Is they a shorter way out than the way I come in?"

"There's only the one opening," Strap admitted, and wished he had bit his tongue off if necessary, to keep from saying it.

Bat Rance's toneless laugh sounded again. "That's all I wanted to know. We'll come back here again—after I've looked at my gold. Get goin'."

"Sure," Strap said, and he started to step past the other, turning his head as he did so.

From behind, garbled echoes started up. Bat Rance whirled. At the same split-wink Strap's fist lashed out on a dead-fall line for Bat's face. There was a thump of knuckles against flesh-padded bone as the fist found its mark. Before the other could rare his gun around, Strap's hand had sliced like a machetti against his wrist. The gun blared flaming lead into the floor.

Strap was savagely exultant. His plan was working perfectly. This mine tunnel was more natural than artificial. In running their drift they had tapped a dried-up underground watercourse. The peculiar convolutions of the ancient passageway were such that at places weird echoes could always be depended upon.

When Strap had turned his head away from Bat Rance he had directed mouth noises at the floor. He had known that the sounds would be picked up, amplified, and hurled at them from behind their backs. But to Bat it had sounded like someone approaching and his attention had been diverted for the second necessary to give Strap Martin his break.

As lead ricocheted between his legs from off the hardrock floor, Strap lunged with both hands outclawed for the gun. That gun jerked upward. Strap felt the hard steel of the barrel under his hand as the razor-edged sight raked the heel of his hand cruelly.

But it was a sweet pain—a pain which meant Bat couldn't blast a bullet through him so long as he held that gun barrel. Their bodies slammed together in the frenzy of the struggle. Bat cursed and pulled trigger. The slug tore through a three-inch space between Strap's arm and ribs.

Strap wrenched the gun to one side, twisting Bat's finger in the trigger guard. The escaped criminal gave a grunt of quick agony and involuntarily slacked his hold. Strap twisted the gun the other way and jerked back.

He got the weapon. He knew a thrill of heady triumph as the gun pulled free in his hands. He thought his troubles were over.

But they had only begun.

He had wrenched back so hard that when he pulled the gun to himself he lost his balance. Not badly. But enough to cause him to take a quick backward step which brought tragedy, black and baleful, piling over him to the eyebrows.

His foot landed half on and half off a jagged piece of ore. The unequal pressure turned his ankle. He fell heavily, ramming his shoulders into the ground. His head thumped hard against rock.

The padded pit-cap saved him from a skull concussion. It did not save him from Bat Rance's wrath.

STRAP regained consciousness to an accompaniment of vicious gun-prodding. He staggered up, reeled stiffly down the entry. Bat clumped behind, measuring the cadence with his curses and with more pokes of the gun snout in Strap's back.

In the shake cabin Bat Rance stood by with the gun while Strap pulled up the rough floor boards to reveal the cached ore. High-grade rock it was, rainbow ore, prettier than any garden of flowers as it flashed its colors in the sun streaming in from the opened door.

Bat stooped, scooped up a handful of the ore. The slack dead-whiteness of his face wrinkled into a ghoulish grin as his blazing eyes noted the threads of almost pure gold glinting softly among the colors.

He didn't let his gold greed interfere with his watch on Strap Martin. Flinging the ore down, he ordered Strap outside.

Out of the tail of his eye the escaped criminal scanned the near tunnel opening where rocks were cribbed in a high sloping bank above the black entrance. The cribbed rocks held back a talus wash which spring rains had carried down the crumbling old-as-the-world mountain.

Bat Rance laughed suddenly. Even under the blue sky his laughter was a grave-yard clacking. "My unforeseen inheritance has mellered me some," he said. "I won't insist on execution fer both you boys. Hay-fork can have life imprisonment. I'll give you a taste of what I had."

His thick hand waved out. "You can see easy what a stick of dynamite exploded atop the tunnel mouth would do. It'd bring a rockslide down that would close the tunnel closer'n the gates of the gray house. If your partner happened—jus' happened—to be inside the tunnel he'd be a long time diggin' out. About a hundred years maybe."

Lights flamed in Strap's eyes. An almost invisible trembling coursed through his body. But his voice was calm.

"You wouldn't, now, ruin a good mine like that—*your own gold mine!*"

"Why wouldn't I? You got enough ore dug out to last me fer a while. I can cash in and buy machines and come back here two-three summers from now and open up casual-like. Imagine our surprise when we find a skeleton. Yeah, I like this idea. You sent me to prison fer life—you thought. Now I'm sendin' Hay-fork to prison for life—I know! I seen him from a distance way around the mountain as I came in. He was grubbin' out prospect samples. It'll be anyhow a whole hour afore he could get here. I'll be ready fer him."

"Bat," Strap bit off the word, "you're a low-livered skunk, lower'n a snake in a wagon track—"

Strap said a lot more, but Bat didn't let it influence him to make an incautious move. He waited till Strap was through, then smirked and said:

"Add to all that there, I am a man with a appreciation fer drammer. You like your partner plenty, don't you? It would tear your heart out to see anything happen to him. Well, you're gonna see. I like him myself better'n what I do you. You was the one put me in the hole fer life, by producin' my gun and provin' it was the one I killed old man Summerfield with. You looked on big drammer when I got my life sentence, didn't you? You're gonna look on bigger when you see your partner git his."

Strap swayed forward, tense-muscled.

"Don't try it," Bat Rance chopped. He jerked his six-gun menacingly. "Reckon I'll tie you more secure."

HIS gun barrel whacked alongside Strap's head with a vicious thud. Strap's out-clawed hands raked down the killer's front as he fell unconscious. This time, blinking painfully back to awareness, Strap found himself gagged and his hands tied behind him.

"Git!" Bat Rance ordered.

Under another barrage of gun jabbings Strap climbed agonizedly up the slope above the tunnel mouth. Bat had found where the partners kept their store of dynamite. He brought a stick along with him.

Picking his spot with a calculating eye, he buried the dynamite with its percussion cap and fuse attached. Behind a concealing curtain of scrub juniper he ordered Strap down.

"From here we can watch when Hay-fork goes into the tunnel," he gloated. "And here's the dynamite

ready to blow. What could be any more sweeter?"

From the first Strap had been chewing as best he could on the gag which had been fastened in his mouth. Gags could be loosened, he knew, in time.

He kept working on the gag until his mouth felt as heavy as an ore crusher. Waves of nausea throbbed over him from the pain of those two stunning blows against his head. But his own thoughts brought the sharpest ache. The maddening certainty that Hay-fork was walking into a death trap—and he here, watching, bound and gagged—

While the death watch went on Bat Rance talked little, though once he broke the sullen quiet by muttering: "After Hay-fork gits his life sentence, you git executed. I hit you in the head with a rock and drag you down there and roll some more rocks on top your dead body so's it'll look like you got caught under the same rock slide that come down while your partner was inside the tunnel workin'. No bullet marks anywhere, see? Everything nice. Onless you pervokes me to bullets."

THE "drammer" started off in just the way it had been planned. Hay-fork came on while the killer held him in his rifle sights. Hay-fork looked in at the cabin and bellowed around for Strap. Hay-fork's legs might be spidery, but there was nothing slender about his lungs.

When Strap didn't answer, Hay-fork lighted a pit lamp and started on a bee-line for the tunnel opening. He was carrying the lariat and chuckling to himself, obviously intent upon playing more tricks on his partner.

Under Bat Rance's gun, Strap worked furiously on the mouth-gag. If he could only get across a warning to his partner, let the gun blast; bullets weren't any more certain than landslides, and they were apt to be quicker. Sweat beaded out on his face from the prodigiousness of his effort. But he couldn't loosen the gag. And Hay-fork, without knowledge of the roaring death which crouched above, walked straight into the mine tunnel. As soon as the dynamite cut loose Hay-fork would be entombed. Bat Rance had beat his own life sentence. He had escaped after five years. But, alone, Hay-fork wouldn't be able to dig out of the Pancake Mountain Mine in a hundred years.

The sun went on soaking into the mountainside with its summer glitter. A blue-bottle fly buzzed around Strap's foot. Overhead a young eagle soared, strengthening its wings. *And Hay-fork was going to die!*

How could everything else be the same and Hay-fork about to die?

It didn't occur to Strap that he was going to die too. All he thought about was his happy-go-lucky partner. Bat Rance swapped rifle for six-gun and walked the few steps toward the buried dynamite. A match flamed under the rasp of his thumb nail. The long fuse on the earthquake-stick sputtered.

Strap stared in stark futility. Then suddenly, tearing through his chaotic desperation, an idea struck. He rared up and flung himself down the steep slope toward the tunnel opening.

Bat Rance lunged a few steps downslope after him and blazed a bullet. Cursing, he followed it with three more. But Strap, with his hands tied behind him, running, falling, sliding, was a poor target. He scurried inside the tunnel opening out of range from the roaring gun.

Bat Rance looked back at that sputtering dynamite fuse, and rocked on his heels in momentary indecision.

Strap's voice floated up from the tunnel below. It wasn't a terrified voice. Strap was laughing! And it wasn't a hysterical laugh. Strap called up, between laughing: "We out-foxed you, Bat, you mangy murderer! They *is* another openin' leads outta this mine. Go ahead and blow your dynamite. We'll be comin' out the other hole."

Hay-fork added a warning. "We'll see you before you see us the next time! You'll wisht you'd stayed behind the walls!"

"You're tryin' to run a blazer!" Bat Rance bellowed. "There ain't no other openin'. You're figgerin' to git me to come rammin' in there after you, and we'll all three die together when the dynamite blows!"

"You're the wise hombre," the mocking voice came up. "But you won't be wise enough to get away with our gold afore we get *you*. Good-by, Bat. Be seein' you right soon."

The voice receded as it talked. The sound of laughter and footfalls receded with it into tunnel distance. Bat Rance, part way between the the sputtering dynamite fuse and the tunnel opening, cursed in panicky indecision. The fuse was too short now to risk climbing back to pluck it. He could take a chance on running for cover. But if he let the partners go, there'd be hell to pay for himself. They'd come out the other opening. They knew these mountains better than he did; with deputy sheriffs in half the state gunning for him, he couldn't afford to take chances leaving the partners alive to give him away.

Fast trick they'd put over, holding out on him about the other mine opening. But he'd show them how far their fast tricks would get them.

WITH a nervous backward glance at the burning fuse, Bat stumbled the rest of the way downslope and plunged into the tunnel mouth. He was glad to get under the roof, out from under the place where that rock-slide was due in a split minute to come thundering down.

Before he took six steps inside the tunnel he thought he had miscalculated. He thought the rock-slide was falling on him.

But it wasn't a rock slide. It was only Hay-fork Hartley and Strap Martin. Bat couldn't figure it out because he had plainly heard their voices receding into the tunnel.

It was the second time Strap had fooled him by utilizing the strange cavern echoes. The partners had remained close inside the tunnel mouth, waiting for Bat Rance to rise to their bait and come ramming heedlessly in pursuit of distant echoes. Hay-fork had cut Strap's hands free and slashed the gag.

The boys did powerfully damaging work within a miraculously short time. They could have knocked their victim cold with a rock, but they were too humane to leave him in the sealed tunnel to die a living death. They concentrated on his six-gun. He shot twice, blasting his lead into the floor as they wrestled with him.

The two shots were all they waited for. The other four had been used up, they knew, blazing at Strap outside. They pulled away and rammed, heads low, elbows punching air, feet pounding, for the open tunnel-mouth, trying to beat that stick of dynamite. They knew Bat Rance would follow. They knew they could take care of him outside.

The idea was all right. The trouble was—they didn't get outside. Neither Hay-fork nor Strap nor Bat Rance. With life at their fingertips the dynamite let go. The mountain heaved, and enough of it to choke a canyon crashed down with a roar of close thunder.

Hay-fork in the lead dug in his heels. The two hurtling behind him collided against his back. They all went down in a tangle of arms and legs, with the roar of a moving mountain in their ears and blackness shutting off vision as rock choked the tunnel entrance and rolled inward.

As silence settled with the dust on that scene of disaster the frenzied shouts of entombed men burst loud in the blackness.

"Hay-fork!" Strap bawled, "where are you? You all right?"

A groan shattered the darkness. "Here I am. All right—except my leg. Broke, I think!"

Strap felt around on the ledge where they kept the miner's lamps. He located one, lighted it. The yellow glow penetrated the rock dust, revealed Hay-fork half buried in the inwash of rock from that dynamited slide.

Bat Rance shoved close. There was nothing the matter with *him*. For a death-freighted instant he and Strap Martin faced each other. Bat had lost his six-gun. The two men stood evenly matched now. With their hands and with rocks they could quickly decide this question of supremacy.

But while they stared, the silence which lies under a mountain, like something alive, weighted close, and it was borne in upon both of them the stark futility of man in a savage world raising his hand against man. For the moment at least they felt a kinship which allied them against the inexorable forces of nature—the forces of death.

Bat Rance lifted his thick hand to his stubbled chin. "Reckon we better start diggin' him out," he growled.

Strap nodded. Together they set in to moving the rocks from Hay-fork's hemmed body. Hay-fork's leg was broken, all right. Strap made his partner as comfortable as possible.

"Let's get goin'," Bat Rance grumbled.

"Goin' where?" Strap asked bleakly.

"Where you think? To the other openin' outta this damn mine."

Strap shook his head. "There ain't no other openin'."

"Huh? But you said—you hollered up to me—"

"That was a gag to get you to chase us in here. I figured I could knock you cold and Hay-fork and me would have time to get out before the dynamite blew. If we'd just knocked you out 'stead of fightin' for your gun, it would have been all right for us. But we went a little soft, I reckon, thinkin' about leavin' you in a livin' tomb—we took the slow way. Now we're all three in the tomb."

"You're runnin' another blaze on me!" Bat Rance said hoarsely. "There must be another way out. You wouldn't of took the chance duckin' in here otherwise—"

"Why wouldn't I? What the hell did I have to lose? You were goin' to kill me, anyway!"

As the truth of the words drove home, all the fight went out of Bat. He slumped. His white face couldn't get any whiter, but his features writhed in soundless terror.

He caught his voice at last, blubbered words: "Whadda we do—just die? Like rats—"

"This is what you had figured out for Hay-fork, ain't it?" Strap said savagely. "How do you like it?"

"Ain't there nothin'—nothin' we can do?"

"Nothin'!"

Hay-fork caught weakly at Strap's arm. "Maybe—there is—somethin'. You remember the place we found that time where—bend close."

Strap lowered his head. His eyes commenced to glow with a fierce light as Hay-fork whispered in feverish jerks.

Suddenly Strap looked up — said harshly to Bat Rance: "We got to carry Hay-fork. Carry him easy, see? You hurt him and I'll kill you! But if you cooperate we may all get out."

TOGETHER the two men, the hunter and the hunted, carried the wounded man. Hay-fork gritted his teeth against the stabbing pain and held a grim silence. His lariat which had caused him so much boisterous merriment in times past, and Strap so much annoyance, was lashed tightly about the broken leg to hold a makeshift splint in place.

Strap's lamp, spreading its yellow smudge ahead, pointed the way. Down the winding tunnel they proceeded, then into a side passage which turned steeply upward. Water in some ancient day had gutted the passage of all obstructions. As the climbing became steeper, it was the smoothness

of the floor which made progress so difficult. The rock became damp and they slipped often. But Bat Rance, mindful of Strap's threat, was careful to shield Hay-fork's broken leg with his own sound body.

At the end they managed to hoist Hay-fork to a shelving rock at the end of the passage. Rising sheer above him was a smooth cliff twice the height of a man's head.

"Now what?" Bat Rance demanded. "Now all we got to do is climb the cliff," Strap told him.

"You mean there's a openin' on that level? I thought you said there wasn't—"

"No openin'. But there's a place up there that comes so close to the outside that we can bust through—if we can get up there."

"Sure we can get up," Bat gloated. "One of us stands on the other's shoulders—"

"All right," Strap said quietly, "stand with your back against the wall and I'll climb up on your shoulders."

With the hope of freedom dangling close Bat Rance was regaining his old arrogance. The black eyes in his white face shone with a calculating glitter as he looked toward that cliff top.

"You stand there," he said. "I'll do the climbin'."

"You've got to do it my way," Strap told him.

"What's the matter?" Bat snarled. "Don't you trust me?" You think I'd go away without lowerin' something to pull you up?"

"That's just what I'm thinkin'."

They stared angrily at each other while death breathed close.

Strap called the turn. He said: "You and I together could manage it —if we would. One man alone's no good on this job, though. There's no timbers to lug up here. And you can see a rock crib's out of the question. You've got to stand there and let me climb up on your shoulders. You'll have my partner for hostage. I wouldn't go off and leave him with a broken leg. I'll pull you up second and together we can haul up Hay-fork."

Bat snarled. "I'm the one climbs up first. If you don't like it, we'll all stay down here and die like rats, the three of us."

MINUTES flowed into hours as they sat, each waiting for the other to crack; and death pounded louder in the ears of both. Hay-fork, fortunately, was not feeling much pain. Twice he sat up to loosen the lariat-wrap against the swelling.

"All right," Strap said quietly, "climb up on my shoulders. You can go first."

Bat stared. He thought there was some catch to it. There wasn't. It was simply that time worked against Strap. Hay-fork's leg was swelling alarmingly. If it was ever going to get proper attention it would have to be soon. There was no other way out. *Strap would have to put his hope of life in this man who had come here to kill them both.*

As soon as Bat realized the offer was on the level, he was groveling in his humility, in his promises to pull Strap up afterwards—he even promised to return the partner's gold.

Strap cut him short. "Start climbin'."

Hay-fork propped himself to a sitting position, tensely awaiting the life-or-death result. His hands moved nervously, again loosening the rawhide on his swelling leg.

The whole thing was over within a short minute. On top of Strap's shoulders, Bat Rance could reach a rock-hold on the upper level. He scrambled up. Strap, relieved of his weight, relaxed, and looked upward.

Bat's head was in view over the edge. His slack white face, in the pale glow from the pit lamp, writhed in a ghoulish smirk. That laugh of toneless clackings sounded.

"Stay down there and die!" he howled. "Fools! Did you think I'd help you up? You got a life sentence

and no shortenin' of it for good behavior!" His arm waved out. "Good-by."

Strap stared dully. He had no particular feeling. Not at the moment. He had almost expected this, and through the hours had braced himself for it. It was as though he had died already and was now without feeling. There came to him suddenly, however, a blighting sorrow for Hay-fork. Life-loving, devil-may-care, spider-legged rascal. Lazy as the day was long— But the world's best pal.

If Strap could have reached up and torn that insolently waving arm from the murderous Bat's shoulder at that moment, he would have done so.

Suddenly he blinked. Something had blurred in the air. Bat Rance was wrenching backwards in deathly panic.

"Give a hand here, Strap!" sounded Hay-fork's weak shout.

Sobbing a prayer, Strap lurched to grasp the thin rawhide which reached upward from Hay-fork's hands and ended in a loop about Bat's thick neck and and the shoulder of the arm which had been waving. Hay-fork, that broken-legged buckaroo, had snaked his lasso upward and dabbed it on Bat Rance in the same manner he yanked rock-piles out of hand! He had slipped the rawhide off his broken leg and—

"Don't pull so hard!" Hay-fork yelled. "You'll pull him over."

"Hell, that's what I'm tryin' to do! The dirty, murderin' double-crossin'—"

"It's better if we all live than if we all die, ain't it?" Hay-fork demanded, excitedly. "This is better'n you're figurin'. Look, pull down jus' hard enough so's Bat'll have to brace his hands agin' the rock to keep from fallin', and so's he can't use his hands to claw the rope off. *Then climb up on the rope!*"

STRAP stared as though the world had suddenly come swirling into his arms. The next split second he was bellowing to Bat Rance: "Hombre, I'm comin' up! You better brace yourself good, on account if you don't, you'll come down."

Gingerly, Strap tested his whole weight on the rope.

"You're pullin' me over," Bat blared; but it wasn't true. Braced, his body muscles bunched and quivering, he was holding Strap's full weight.

Strap climbed up.

The instant he was on top and his weight was relaxed on the rope, Bat Rance butted forward in an attempt to knock Strap off the cliff.

Strap was looking for it. He swerved. His fist, low-swinging, caught Bat hard below the ear, rocked him back on his heels. Before the murderous-minded criminal could rush in again, Strap was all over him, swinging rights and lefts, and forcing the fight away from that fatal cliff edge.

In a desperate attempt to put over a "sleeper," Strap overshot his fist. He grunted as Bat Rance thudded short-arm blows to the midriff.

The fight settled down to a gruelling exchange of blows. There was nothing to inhibit either of them now. They had gained the cliff top. Freedom lay just ahead for the taking. Freedom for one, death for the other.

Toe to toe they stood and rocked each other with their blows. Their lights were knocked to the floor. In the flooding darkness they grappled and crashed to the rock, punching, clawing, kicking. Bat Rance got his thumb in Strap's mouth and tried to tear the cheek. Strap bit that thumb half off.

Bat Rance yowled and gouged for the eyes. Strap was pinned underneath in such a way that he couldn't pull clear. The pressure of those thick fingers digging at his eye-balls was a torture that shot pain, like white-hot slivers of metal, through his brain.

Strap thought he was going to lose his eyes, which meant that he would

lose his life, because without sight he could never find where to dig through the crust to the mountain surface, or even manage to lift Hay-fork on top the tunnel cliff.

But happy-go-lucky Hay-fork came to his aid. Indirectly he did. At least his lariat did. . . . Strap's groping fingers came in contact with the rawhide still looped about Bat Rance's neck. He managed to give it another twist around that thick neck. He yanked.

Bat Rance let up on the eye gouging and gave serious attention to keeping himself from being choked to death. Strap thudded in a knuckled blow which whacked his opponent's head against rock. All the fight went out of Bat Rance. He slumped and lay as still as a dead man.

Strap felt around and got one of the lamps burning. Then he removed the lasso loop from around Bat and lowered it over the cliff to Hay-fork.

With Hay-fork hoisted safely on top, Strap's work was cut out for him. He carried his injured partner a short distance to a place in the upper drift where water seepage occurred. While he was being hoisted Hay-fork had clung tenaciously to a rock pick. Strap now used the pick to make soundings against the low roof. He listened carefully. His practiced ear told him where the crust of tight conglomerate was thinnest.

"I'll be back quick," he told Hay-fork.

His light bobbed away in the darkness and he came back dragging the limp body of Bat Rance. The man was regaining consciousness. Strap put the pick in his hands and indicated the thin place in the low roof.

"Dig!"

Bat dug. In effect he was digging himself into prison. He knew it well enough, but every time he slackened his pace Strap gave him a choice of speeding up or being pushed back over the tunnel cliff. When it came to choosing between a man-made prison and this dark dungeon under a mountain—Bat Rance dug, even though his feet were hobbled with Hay-fork's rope.

Later when he had broken through the crust of gravel and dirt and they were all outside breathing deeply of the sunlit mountain air, Strap looked from his prisoner to his patient and said:

"We'll have your leg patched up in no time.'"

Hay-fork grinned weakly. "Sure was lucky I kept my loopin' eye in practice by yankin' all them picks and shovels outta your hands, wasn't it?"

"From now on," Strap said heartily, "you can snake all the tools outta my hand you want to. I reckon we should name your lasso 'redemption rope.'"

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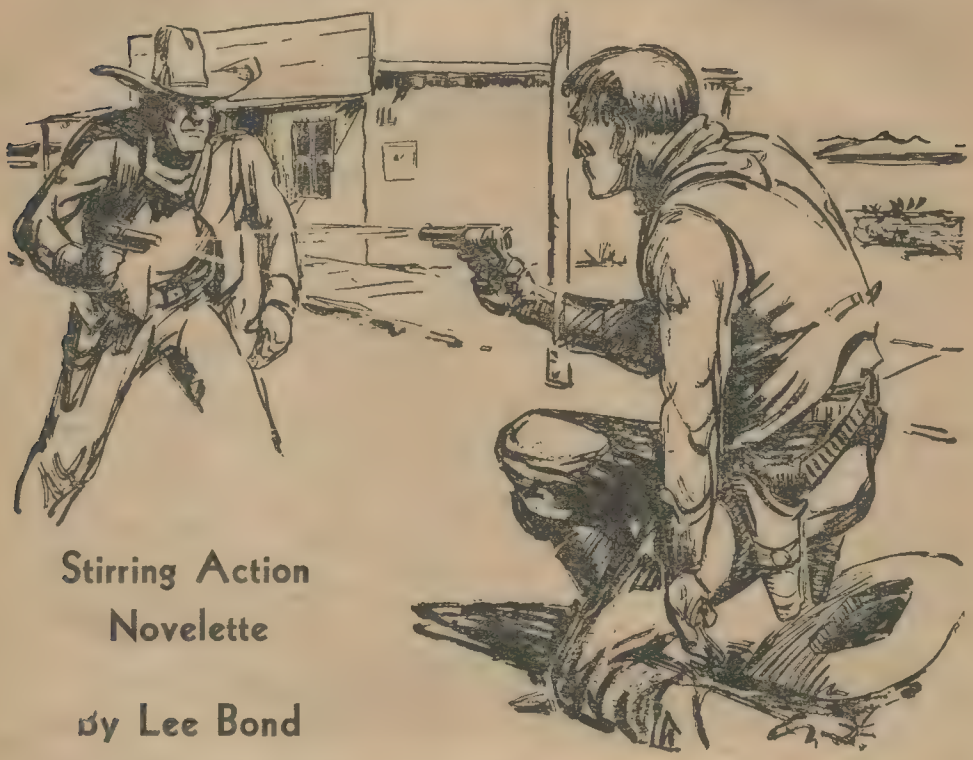


Stirring Action Novelette

by Lee Bond

As Joe Tandy, hog-tied, watched his pardner being buried alive, his soul shriveled to bullet-size. But when he tried to trigger out his vengeance oath, red-hot hate jammed his guns.

CHAPTER I

Hellions Amuck

OLD BUCK NEAL was still breathing a little when the Tumbling V gunmen rolled him into the shallow grave there beneath the great pines. Old Buck was clad only in his underpants, and from the great, yawning bullet hole in his scrawny chest crimson bubbles spewed now and then.

Tied hard and fast to the bole of a great pine, Joe Tandy saw those red bubbles lifting now and then from the wound in his partner's chest, and knew that old Buck still had a spark of life in his tough old body. But Buck Neal was unconscious, and would have died at almost any moment. Joe Tandy tried to think of it that way as he watched helplessly while those four Tumbling V hellions rolled Buck in the shallow grave and began covering him with dirt and rock.

Not that Joe Tandy was taking this thing quietly. Blood matted Tandy's corn-colored hair, where his scalp had been split with the barrel of a six-gun. Joe could taste the salty blood that

ran into his mouth, and could feel the stuff drying along his cheeks and neck. And he could feel fresh blood running from his wrists as he heaved and wrenched at the ropes which held him to the pine bole. He cursed Rod Vintros and his Tumbling V hellions until his throat gave off only dry, sobbing sounds.

They were mounding up old Buck's grave now and Buck was dead for sure. Joe Tandy's blood and dirt-smeared face was contorted as he leaned raging against the ropes which held him.

"I'll get you sons for this, Vintros," he croaked. "Hear me, you yella livered son of a snake? I'll gut-shoot you four if it's the last thing I ever do. Why couldn't you 'a' killed me, too, damn your snake-blooded soul?"

Rod Vintros turned from the newly finished grave, sounding hellish laughter that Joe Tandy would never forget. Vintros was a squat-bodied man, with an abnormally large, flat-crowned head and practically no neck. Hair that was as coarse and black as a pony's mane covered his ugly head, and his long, undershot jaws showed a blue-black smudge of freshly shaven beard. His slanted eyes were the color of polished onyx. A flat, thick nose and puffy lips added to the brutal cast of his face.

"Quit fightin' your head, kid," Vintros called in a dry, brittle voice. "Tandy, we left you alive so's you could round up your Circle 5 stock an' get to hell out o' this country. You should be glad we don't grab your stock. Would if some of these damn ranchers wouldn't get wise. I told you and Buck Neal not to nose into my affairs when you squatted here on Devil Crick. Now you're going to tuck tail and run. I like that better than killin' you sudden. It fits a Tandy better."

Red Vintros walked over to his big bay gelding, fished a quart bottle from a saddle pocket, and pried the cork out with a knife blade. He pocketed the knife, walked back to stand on thick, knotty legs that were wide spaced as he glowered down at Joe Tandy. Vintros lifted the quart bottle to his wet lips, tilted his big, ugly head. He drank deeply of the fiery whiskey, smacked his lips loudly as he lowered the bottle.

Thin, quick-moving Wasp Caney, Tumbling V ramrod, sidled up, pale, killer eyes fastened greedily on the bottle. Vintros shoved the bottle into Caney's thin, blue veined hands, and the ramrod's slash of a mouth twisted into a nasty grin.

"Here's to worms in old Buck Neal's grave," he toasted in a raspy, nasal voice. "An' I'll be filin' another notch on my guns after we git outa here."

"And like the rest of the notches on them pearl-gripped guns you pack, Caney, the new notch will mean another man shot in the back," Joe Tandy panted. "You bushwhackin' cabron, I seen you drill Buck through the back when you four sons busted into our cabin at daylight. Some day, Caney—"

Joe Tandy got no further. Wasp Caney's boot toe caught him in the face, slamming his head back hard against the big pine. Tandy's lanky body went limp for a moment, and he could barely hear the Tumbling V foreman's foul oaths.

But Joe Tandy blinked the shock-fog away, lifted his head to watch Wasp Caney down his drink from the bottle. The other two Tumbling V hands were coming forward now, eager for a turn at the bottle.

FAT, moon-faced Pig Grady got the bottle first. His hooded, bloodshot eyes whipped down to meet Joe Tandy's gaze. Pig Grady spat deliberately at the blood smeared face of the helpless youngster, then tilted the bottle to his wide lips. Pig Grady passed the bottle to Bret Lake, the fourth member of the murder party. Lake was a gawky man, with a long, unpleasant face, puckered green eyes and big, crooked teeth that showed

now as Lake grinned a murderous grin.

"Here's to worms in *your* grave, Tandy," Lake chuckled hoarsely. "Me, I'd shoot you here and now if I was runnin' this show. A sap-headed kid like you ain't got sense enough to clear out. I'll have the pleasure of puttin' a bullet through you next time, instead of just battin' you to sleep with a gun barrel."

Bret Lake took his drink, then handed the bottle back to Rod Vintros, who promptly swilled what remained of the whiskey. Vintros half turned, and his ugly head twisted towards the little log house that Joe Tandy and old Buck Neal had built two years ago.

"Bret, you and me will go kill them hosses down yonder in the corral," he said as calmly as if outlining an ordinary job. "Wasp, you and Pig go set that damned shack on fire. Leave the barn standing. Maybe we can use it some day."

Joe Tandy tried to yell, tried to call to the men as they moved away. But the words choked in Joe's throat, and he turned his eyes to the new grave which held his old partner.

Joe tried not to listen to the slamming of guns, the screams of mortally wounded horses. And he tried not to listen to the crackling of flames that grew louder as the roar of guns and screams of his saddle horses finally ceased. Joe Tandy was shuddering as if chilling when Rod Vintros and his three men came back, to stand staring coldly down at him.

Vintros leaned forward suddenly and the keen bladed stock knife was in his hand. He slashed the ropes which held Joe Tandy to the tree, stepped back, and grinned his wet-lipped grin. Joe Tandy snarled an oath, started to his feet. But Rod Vintros kicked him solidly in the groin, laughed mockingly when the youth wilted, gagging from the terrific pain.

"Clear out, nester," Vintros snarled. "Gather your pot-bellied dogies an' quit this country. I'll give you a week, kid. If you ain't gone by then we'll be back."

Joe Tandy heard, but could not answer. He lay shuddering and groaning, listening to the clink of spurs as the Tumbling V men moved away. Saddles squeaked now, and a moment later shod hoofs lapped dully away through the pine forest which covered the bench where Joe Tandy and his partner had built their house.

Joe Tandy tried to get to his feet, thinking that he could perhaps check the fire before the little log house was completely ruined. But his head swam from the pain his movements brought, and he pitched over on his face, sank into merciful oblivion.

CHAPTER II

Lawman Savvy

WHEN Joe Tandy regained consciousness the sun was almost straight overhead. The lean hombre got to his feet, stood swaying a moment, one hand braced against the pine tree. The whole thing came back with a hellish rush when he saw old Buck's grave over there. Joe swallowed hard a few times, tore his gaze from the grave, and turned slowly.

Where the house had stood was now a great heap of ashes and smoldering coals. Joe Tandy leaned back against the pine tree, trying to marshal whirling thoughts into some semblance of order. Grief and rage made it hard for him to get self-control, and it was several minutes before he became calm enough to think straight.

Joe was clad only in his underwear, for those Tumbling V devils had struck while he and old Buck were still in bed. Joe winced as he moved forward, for sharp stones bit into his bare soles. But he kept going, a gaunt, blood-smeared scarecrow that limped and reeled down towards the ruins of the house. But before he reached the great ash and coal heap that had been his home, Joe Tandy's gaze was directed towards the corrals.

Buzzards, literally hundreds of them, were perched along the pole corral, croaking and hissing as they spread great wings, ready to take flight. Joe screamed shrill curses at the ugly black birds, suddenly wild with the rage that had been burning through his reason. He raced along the path, jabbering, waving his arms, heedless of the stones that were ripping his feet so that he left bloody tracks over the hard ground.

Buzzards flapped clumsily from the corral rails, others came whooshing up from within the corral. In his frenzy Joe Tandy hurled sticks and stones towards the vast black flock of croaking, frightened buzzards. And in the physical exertion of running and throwing he found some relief.

His rage cooled as he reached the corral, threw the gate open. He groaned, staring at the twelve head of saddle horses he had penned there only yesterday. The horses were an unpleasant sight now, for the buzzards had got in their grisly work.

Joe Tandy reeled to the long, mossy horse trough at one side of the corral, stripped off his underwear, and rolled into the cold water. The shock of the water steadied Joe, brought his full reason back. But it did not erase the set expression on his lean face, nor dim the smoldering, dangerous lights deep in his blue eyes.

He quit the horse trough after a thorough washing, hobbled over to the barn. He found an old pair of levis, shirt and cracked boots there in the barn—clothing he wore when cleaning the big stable. He got into the clothing, working almost mechanically now. Down the low row of stalls a horse whinnied, and Joe's head lifted sharply. Until now he had forgotten Diablo, the big sorrel Morgan stallion which was kept in a box stall at the far end of the barn.

Joe moved over to a wall peg, took down his own saddle and bridle, and moved down along the stalls. Diablo whinnied to him, pawing loudly.

Joe and old Buck had had high hopes of breeding good saddle horses. They had even dreamed of some day running a band of purebred Morgans on their Circle 5. Joe's throat felt tight as he entered the box stall and began rigging Diablo. The stud was nipping at him, sniffing loudly. The shooting had made the powerfully muscled sorrel jumpy. He squealed and kicked once when Joe pinched him with the latigo ring.

"Steady, boy." Joe's voice sounded empty, cold. "It's you and me now, Diablo. It's up to us to run down a bunch of two-legged skunks. Old Buck is gone, feller. You liked Buck a lot. And he was like a daddy to me. Hell, horse, we've got us some skunk huntin' to do!"

JOE led the stud from the barn, had to hang onto the reins with all his might when Diablo came out into the corral that reeked of death. The stallion dragged Joe around some, and smashed at him once with front hoofs. But Joe Tandy had never lost his temper with a horse. He kept talking to the big sorrel, and finally got him out through the gate.

Diablo crouched and trembled, wide nostrils sniffing the tainted air. His shapely head turned once, and Joe could have sworn that the stallion was staring at the smouldering ash heap which had once been the house.

But Joe Tandy had other things on his mind just now. Hatless and without guns, his first job was to get into town and prepare himself for the grim business of man hunting. He would report to Sheriff Sooner Hale, sure. But Joe's lips curled at thought of the big, knotty-jawed sheriff, who was dumber than any goat ever could be.

Joe's lip was still curling when he galloped into Caprock town two hours later, and he was still thinking of the futility of reporting to the sheriff. Yet he slowed the sweat-lathered stallion, turned in to the solid stone building which stood out plainly

among the frame and log structures which lined either side of Caprock's one street.

Along the plank sidewalks men were staring, beginning to call excitedly to each other. Those men began bunching to rush along the walks towards the grim stone building which was combination sheriff's office and jail. They knotted at the doorway, to peer inside, hushed by the scene they witnessed.

On wide planted feet, Joe Tandy stood before a battered desk, reeling a little, fists knotted at his sides. The swift ride to town had started that scalp wound flowing again, and Joe's lean, set face was streaked with blood and sweat. Behind the battered desk sat Sheriff Sooner Hale, bulging brown eyes fairly sticking out on stems, jaw hanging loosely open.

Joe Tandy began with the raid on his place just at daylight, explaining how old Buck Neal had been shot through the back when he reared up in his bunk as the Tumbling V killers crashed through the front door. In a voice that was tense and cold he told how old Buck had been buried before he could draw his last breath, and how the horses had been killed and the house burned.

"I see you don't believe me," he finished grimly. "Hale, you're smeared with skunk oil now from associatin' with Rod Vintros. Do you aim to arrest them four hellions for this? Will you arrest 'em an' see that they hang or do I—"

Joe did not finish. The crowd at the back door scattered under a barrage of snarling oaths. Then Rod Vintros and Wasp Caney were in the sheriff's office, hands on gun butts as they stared first at the sheriff, then at Joe Tandy.

A red film swam before Joe's eyes —a film of rage that snapped his reason for the moment. With a roaring yell he launched himself through the air, caught Rod Vintros a slashing blow along the jaw with one fist. Vintros reeled, swearing in pain as he dragged at his holstered guns.

The sheriff was yelling, and the crowd outside was roaring. But Joe Tandy paid no heed to those wild cries. He bored in once more, blood streaked face set and white as he lashed out a long left. That blow caught Rod Vintros full in the mouth, hurled him backwards.

Joe Tandy was hurtling towards the fallen gunman when a powerful hand caught him, whirled him around. He found himself staring into the big sheriff's bulging eyes. The sheriff pressed a cocked .45 against Joe's heaving side, finger on the trigger.

"Come quiet to a cell, kid, or I'll ream you," the sheriff growled. "Hell, nobody will swaller this wild tale you've told. Until I can check up on things you roost in the hoosegow. Come on!"

CHAPTER III

Murder Plan

ROD VINTROS stood with his broad back to the mahogany bar there in the Home Corral Saloon. Vintros winced when the raw whiskey he was drinking came in contact with his split and swollen lips. And there was a blue lump on the Tumbling V owner's jaw where Joe Tandy's knuckles had raked him. But Rod Vintros grinned as he finished his drink, glanced sidewise along the bar where Wasp Caney, Pig Grady and Bret Lake stood sipping drinks.

Out in the main room a crowd stood watching and waiting. Sheriff Sooner Hale was in the van of the crowd, a stupid grin on his face as he watched Vintros.

"Well, boys," Vintros called, "I know you all want to hear my side of this crazy yarn. So here it is. Me an' these three men of mine stayed at the Forest Hotel last night. Ask the proprietor if you like. An' go ask the livery owner if our broncs, which we

stabled last night about dusk, have been out of his barn since that."

"That's right," a grizzled little man with puckered eyes called. He was old Fred Everett, owner of the only feed and livery barn in town. And no man had ever questioned the word of the quiet, honest little stableman.

"Yeah, that's right," Everett repeated. "Vintros an' them three men o' his there at the bar put their horses up at my place last night. I sleep at the barn, as yuh all know. Their hosses never left my place."

"Yeah, and Mr. Vintros and them three men of his didn't come out of my hotel until a couple hours ago," a lean, sallow-faced hombre spoke up.

The sallow faced man was Jack Durkin, owner of the Forrest Hotel. Durkin's surly temper and a habit of picking quarrels whenever possible made him an unpopular citizen. But no one had ever caught Jack Durkin in a lie.

"Well, now, that settles the whole thing," Sheriff Hale bawled in evident relief. "Why that fool kid would tell such a crazy yarn is beyond me. But I'll go out an' have a look at his place, even if the whole tale is likely a pack o' lies."

The sheriff had already chosen certain men to ride out with him. He called those men now, and led them out the swing doors. Old Fred Everett scowled after the posse, and was about to follow them when Rod Vintros hailed him.

"Have our Tumblin' V hosses been grained an' watered today, Everett?" Vintros wanted to know.

"They have," the little stableman nodded shortly. "Yuh know blamed well I take care of any hoss that's left with me."

"No offense," Vintros shrugged. "These boys an' me will be headin' home now. Just wanted to know that the broncs was ready."

He produced a roll of bills, paid for the care of the four horses.

Everett pocketed the money, sauntered out through the swing doors. The sheriff and his posse were already mounted and galloping down the street. Old Fred Everett scowled after them until they turned out across the cedar-dotted hills beyond the town, then turned to hurry down the sidewalk. A few moments later he was in the jail, leaning against the barred door of Joe Tandy's cell.

"Dang it, son, this mess looks bad," the old stable keeper growled. "I've heard tall tales, shore. But would yuh mind givin' me the facts?"

JOE got up to stand before the bars, face working in anger. He retold the story, while old Fred Everett stood swearing in a raspy voice. The jailer, a burly, bull-necked fellow who had worked for Rod Vintros until a few months ago, stood nearby, sneering openly, one big, raw-red hand gripping a sawed-off scattergun.

"Lies!" the burly jailer sneered. "Everett, yuh ain't believin' nothin' that forked-tongued fool says, are yuh?"

"Open this cell door and call me a liar, Monk Baker!" Joe Tandy snarled. "You mangy coyote, you've hated me ever since I whipped your ears down the night I caught you rawhidin' old Buck Neal. Buck was too soused to realize that you aimed to egg him into drawin', then shoot him. Open this door, and I'll give you another beatin', Baker."

Monk Baker's coarse features went blotchy with rage, and for a moment he gripped the shotgun as if he meant to use it. Then he whirled on one heel and stomped away, muttering under his breath.

"Don't pay any attention to that skunk, Joe," old Fred Everett almost whispered. "Cool down an' do some thinkin'. Do yuh know any reason why Rod Vintros would want yuh an' Buck out o' his way?"

"Plain greed is the only reason," Joe growled. "Vintros used them high

benches Buck and me bought for summer range until it was sold to us. Since then he's been ornery, and has threatened more than once to run us out."

"Uh-huh, an' his lower range dried out pretty bad last summer, so he's scared he'll have another grass shortage this year," the old stableman nodded. "He's overcrowded that foothills country where most o' his range lays. Unless he can git back them high slopes o' yours, he'll likely have to sell off a bunch o' cattle at a loss."

"That's it," Joe gritted. "But right now such things don't matter. Fred, did you hear what I said about them snakes buryin' Buck before he had plumb quit breathin'?"

The old stable owner reeled back. There was something so deadly, something so viciously cold in the young puncher's voice that Fred Everett felt himself shivering. And wise in the ways of men as he was, the old fellow knew about what was going on inside that lean youngster's head. Fred Everett wanted to give Joe some advice, warn him to take things easy for a while. But Monk Baker came stalking back, sneering and scowling.

"Time's up, Everett," Baker said shortly. "Better go 'tend to yore own knittin'."

The old fellow tried to catch Joe's eye, hoping to pass the youngster some encouraging sign. But Joe was staring hotly at Monk Baker, and the stableman turned away.

WHEN Everett had vanished through the front door of the building Monk Baker came sliding up to Joe's cell, a twisted grin on his hard mouth.

"So yuh run right straight to the law with what yuh knowed, eh?" he sneered. "An' what good will that do yuh? The boss an' the other three boys has got air-tight alibis, you fool."

In a gloating voice he recounted how Fred Everett and the hotel man had offered solid alibis for Rod Vintros and those other three. Joe stood stony faced and silent, agile mind swiftly digesting the things he had heard. He nodded as Monk Baker finished, lips white-ringed with new rage.

"So that's it, eh?" he snarled. "Vintros and them other three had some other Tumblin' V skunk meet 'em at the edge of town this mornin' early with horses. They rode out, raided Buck and me, then returned, while that feller helpin' 'em took the sweaty horses back to the home ranch."

"Who in blazes told yuh?" Monk Baker gasped, jaw sagging in surprise.

"Nobody, fool!" Joe Tandy rasped. "Hell, Baker, that's the only way it could have been done and still leave them four such airtight alibis. Sneakin' out the back of the hotel, which is at the edge of town, would be easy. And sneakin' back in after sunup this mornin' would also be easy."

"But yuh can't prove it was done that way," bull-necked Monk Baker jeered. "Yuh can't prove a thing on the boss, so yuh may as well do as he says an' hightail yonderly."

"So Vintros is still your boss, eh?" Joe rapped. "Even if you are drawin' county money as jailer, you still take orders from Vintros."

"An' that is somethin' else yuh can't prove," Monk Baker growled.

"I'll be able to prove plenty before I'm done here, stupid," Joe flung out hotly.

"Like hell yuh will," the burly jailer came back. "The boss will be down this way after awhile. Yuh're gonna try a jail break, Tandy. An' as jailer, I'll have to mow yuh down with this scattergun. The boss has changed his mind about givin' yuh a week to clear out. He didn't figure you'd have nerve to come here."

"In other words," Joe Tandy said slowly, "you aim to blow me to hell with buckshot, then claim I tried to escape. And Rod Vintros will be an eye witness to clear you."

CHAPTER IV

Crush-Out Powder

ICY prickles played tag along Joe Tandy's spine. Until now his rage and grief over Buck Neal's death had kept him from thinking much about his own plight. But it occurred to Joe suddenly that he had to live. He had to out-fox this bull-necked murderer somehow and escape if he was to bring Rod Vintros and those other three to justice.

Joe read his own death warrant in Monk Baker's eyes as he stood there, locking glances with the killer. Baker was drooling a little, and kept running a nervous thumb over the curving hammers of the double-barreled shot gun.

"I'll enjoy this," Baker sneered. "Damn yore soul, yuh whupped me oncet an' I ain't forgot. I'll enjoy pullin' these triggers when the time comes."

Monk Baker was trying to whip up his own courage as much as anything else. He came a step closer, stuck his ugly face close to the bars.

Joe Tandy felt that red rage possess him once more. He was trapped here like a rat, with no chance whatever of getting out alive. Given time, he might have found some way of escaping. But Rod Vintros would be along any moment now, to stand gloating, to watch Monk Baker do his grisly work.

Those thoughts seared across Joe's brain as he tensed his lean muscles. He settled his shoulders slightly, then his right fist was lashing out. The fist whipped between two of the bars, aimed squarely at Monk Baker's leering mouth.

Joe figured that the best he could do would be knock a few big yellow teeth out of Baker's head. But Baker saw the fist coming, swung his head sidewise. And the next instant Joe Tandy was stifling a yell of fierce delight. Baker swung his head just far enough to catch that whizzing fist full on the base of his jaw. And Monk Baker went down as if shot between the eyes, completely cold. The scattergun bounced out along the hall's cement floor, while Monk Baker slumped limply against the barred door, to sprawl out before it.

It was a freak knockout—a complete accident. But Joe Tandy was not stopping to analyze such things just then. He stopped, shot lean arms through the bars, and rolled Baker over. Sweat oozed from Joe's pores, and his lean hands shook as he found the big key ring, straightened up.

It was clumsy, reaching through like that and finding which one of the big keys fitted the cell lock. But Joe finally found the right key, heard the massive lock work creakily, and shoved through.

He stripped a pair of shell studded belts from about Baker's waist, fitted them about his own. The shell studded belts held a pair of holstered .45's that felt just right when Joe drew and inspected them.

He rolled Monk Baker into the cell, locked it, and threw the keys far back under the cot of another cell. Joe snatched Baker's Stetson from the floor, saw that it was practically new and would fit him. He drew the big black John B on carefully, and was turning towards the front of the building when he heard horses halting out there. Joe sprinted up the runway before the cells, and was entering the sheriff's office when the front door slapped open.

Bret Lake stepped across the threshold, long face split in an ugly grin. "The boss an' me come to see the show, Monk," he called. "That damned kid is too gabby to keep on livin'. He might convince some o' these—Look out, boss!"

Bret Lake had halted short as he yelled, long, ugly face slowly draining of color. Not until he had looked squarely into Joe Tandy's blazing eyes had he realized that the man there in the room before him was not Monk Baker, though he wore Baker's hat.

"You said you'd lead my guts next time we met, Lake." Joe Tandy's voice was like the whisper of wind through tall pines. "Now's your chance. Draw, for I aim to kill you."

Outside, Joe caught a fleeting glimpse of Rod Vintros, backing swiftly away from the open door. Then Bret Lake was drawing, screaming a nerve-wracked oath as he slapped down for his twin guns.

Joe Tandy's lean hands ripped down and up, and from the level of his hips came twin streamers of fire and smoke. Bret Lake squealed like a stuck shoat, began running blind circles. He dropped the guns he had not fired, began clawing at his belly with hooked fingers. Blood oozed through those clawing fingers, spattered over the floor.

"Remember Buck Neal, damn you!" Joe Tandy snarled, and leaped past the screaming, gagging killer who had two slugs through his middle.

JOE hit the wooden sidewalk outside, lost his footing, and fell to hands and knees. A bullet ripped over his back, plunked into the stone wall of the jail. Across the street Joe saw Rod Vintros, smoking gun in hand. Vintros was leaping frantically for the narrow alleyway between two buildings.

Joe sat back on his haunches, sent a pair of bullets screaming across the dusty street. One of the slugs lifted Rod Vintros's hat, cocked it far over to one side. The other brought a spray of splinters from the corner of the building around which Vintros was turning. Joe sent two more bullets into the dark passage between the buildings, heard Vintros yell in pain or terror. But that yell was husky, full throated, and Joe knew that he had either merely singed Vintros or only frightened him.

And Joe had other worries now, for men were boiling from doorways all along the street, some of them brandishing guns. A slug came ripping past Joe's head, and another plucked at his shirt sleeve. He whirled, darted around the corner of the jail, and went legging it towards the back as fast as he could run.

He knew that Diablo would be in the sheriff's private corral, which was at the edge of town, out behind the sheriff's house. And for that corral Joe headed, knowing that it would take Rod Vintros and his friends a few minutes at least to gather their wits.

Joe reloaded both guns as he ran, and kept a sharp watch back over one shoulder. He doubled and dodged between houses, jumped fences, and ran crouched along board fences that would hide him from whoever might be coming out of the town's main street. But Joe reached the sheriff's house without having spotted pursuit.

He found Diablo in the corral, and got the stud saddled before he heard the bay of the pack of men who were now organized and coming his way. Joe flung up into the saddle, headed Diablo for the back side of the corral, and spoke sharply as he rammed home the hooks. Diablo whistled shrilly, sailed up and over the corral fence like the expert jumper he was.

The mob on Joe's trail saw horse and rider sail over the fence, opened fire. But neither Joe nor the great stallion were touched by the slugs that came singing in the air about them. And once on the ground, the pole corral gave them ample protection.

A brushy draw ran within two hundred yards of the corral, and Joe headed for it, knowing that he had little to fear from his pursuers. Before they could find mounts and give chase, Diablo would have carried his rider far back into those low, cedar-covered hills. And so far as a straight race was concerned, Joe had no worries. Diablo was not only one of the fastest horses in the country but one of the toughest.

But Joe Tandy was not to escape so easily. Diablo was within fifty yards

of the brushy draw when horsemen swarmed up out of it, off to the left. Joe swerved instinctively, to see other horsemen coming into view down the gulch to his right. And with a sickening heart he recognized one of the riders as Sheriff Sooner Hale.

Quickly, Joe figured what had happened. The sheriff and his posse had been returning to town. The main trail came down a hill, over across that bushy draw yonder.

"Hale and his posse seen me at the corral, separated, and cut across the draw," Joe groaned. "Well, Diablo, here's where we cash in, I reckon. Them fools will drill us, that's certain."

But even in the face of that almost certain truth, Joe Tandy was not giving up. The possemen on each side of him were yelling, waving guns at him. And some hombre had crawled up on the sheriff's barn and was opening up with a rifle.

Joe felt the wind of a bullet that slashed past his neck from behind. Then he flattened out along Diablo's neck, rammed the hooks to the stallion, and drew both guns. Joe kneed Diablo, cocked both guns, and headed straight towards the sheriff and the men who rode beside him.

CHAPTER V

Bullet Showdown

IT was the sniper atop the sheriff's barn who gave Joe Tandy a hand. That sniper was shooting to kill, and shooting at Joe Tandy. But Diablo's mighty stride as he changed courses threw the sniper's aim off. The rifleman's second bullet went a yard wide. His third shot was only a few inches wide, passing Joe's crouching body. But that third slug went straight into the breast of the sheriff's horse, piling the animal up, stone dead.

The sheriff came sailing out over the dead bronc's ears, arms windmilling, mouth open as he howled an oath of alarm. The four men behind the sheriff did not check their mounts in time to prevent a pile-up over the dead horse. And in that moment of wild confusion while men and horses formed a mad tangle there on the ground, Joe Tandy saw his chance, took it.

He yelled shrilly into the flattened ears of his own mount, raked with dull spurs. The stallion screamed a warning as a horse staggered up in its path. The riderless horse snorted in terror of the hurtling stud, flung sidewise and bolted.

Then Joe Tandy was past the possemen and their threshing mounts, roaring down into the brushy draw. Sweat glistened on Joe's face and his hands were shaking as he lowered the hammers of his guns to half cock, sheathed them. He gripped the reins now and sent Diablo dodging this way and that through the brush.

From behind him came faint yells, and once Joe saw sand spray ahead of him as some man fired from the lip of the draw. But the brush was thick just ahead, and Joe Tandy set his teeth against the pain of lashing branches as the stallion tore into the thicket at top speed.

Half an hour later Joe topped a ridge, looked back. Riders were boiling through the brush back there, following his sign. Others hammered along ridges to the right and to the left of him. Back along the street of the town, dwarfed by distance, other men were mounting, joining the stream which poured towards the hills. A bitterness gripped Joe Tandy to augment the cold rage that was already upon him. Through slitted eyes he watched the pursuit, while Diablo caught his wind.

"Outlawed!" Joe snarled in a harsh voice. "Because I broke jail and shot Bret Lake, the law will want to hang me."

He would not have time now to gather the Circle 5 cattle which had belonged to him and old Buck. He would have to quit the country, head down across the Mexican border. Yet

Joe was not thinking of himself so much. He was thinking more of Buck Neal, who had been like a daddy to him since he could remember. Of his own parents, Joe knew only what old Buck Neal had told him, which was precious little.

"That back-shootin' Billy the Kid and the ki-ote blooded bunch he bossed murdered Jim and Cora Tandy, yore ma an' pappy, when they raided yore dad's Cross 7 down in Lincoln county one night," old Buck had said. "I was yore daddy's foreman, button. Yuh was only a mite over a year old that night. I taken yuh and lit a shuck over this way. I've tried to raise yuh like I'd want my own son raised—if I had one."

That was all old Buck had ever said. He never told Joe Tandy that Billy the Kid and his cold-blooded pack killed Jim Tandy because Jim Tandy had gunned down Trig Vintros, a murdering friend of Billy the Kid's. Nor had old Buck ever told Joe that they were living neighbors to the son of Trig Vintros. Old Buck knew that Rod Vintros and his kind had been run out of Lincoln county after the bloody war was over. Buck had never told Joe those things, thinking that Rod Vintros would have sense enough to let old grudges slide and not wanting to disturb Joe's peace of mind.

But Buck Neal had miscalculated Rod Vintros. Old Buck was dead now, and could not tell Joe such things. And Joe was galloping through the cedar-dotted hills, with half a hundred men on his trail.

JOE had never been able to understand the venomous hate Rod Vintros held for him. Once, Vintros had mouthed something about settling accounts for his father. Rod had been drunk that night, and Joe had turned his back and walked out of the Home Corral Saloon rather than kill the bleary eyed Tumbling V owner. But Joe had never forgotten that remark Rod Vintros had made. He was remembering it now, and trying, as he had tried before, to figure out what Vintros could have meant. But Joe had no way of figuring the thing out, since old Buck Neal had never told him the facts.

Joe dismounted in a fringe of pine timber now, loosened the cinches, and let Diablo blow a while. He had lost those men who were following his sign by riding over a lot of tight ground down yonder in the foothills. But there were good trackers in that bunch, and they would figure out his trail sooner or later. Probably they'd head toward the Tumbling V, thinking he'd go there.

Joe tightened his cinches when Diablo had rested, and slanted down into the valley where he and Buck had built their cabin. He had to see Buck's grave just once more. He swallowed the lump in his throat when he halted under the pines beside old Buck's resting place. He swung down, and carried stones from a ledge beyond the pines. He fixed Buck's grave so that coyotes could not dig it open. He stood now with sweat glistening on his lean, tense face.

"So long, pardner," he said huskily. "I've got to light a shuck yonderly, Buck. The whole damned country is against me now. But before I ride, ol' timer, I'm aimin' to try my hand at gut-shootin' Wasp Caney for killin' you. And I'll maybe take a shot at Rod Vintros, too."

Joe led his horse down to the corral, jaws clamping grimly as he watched the sky grow black with wheeling, hissing buzzards. The great clumsy birds swarmed up out of the corral until the sun seemed blotted out of the azure sky. But Joe was not venting his feelings on the ugly vultures this time.

He left his horse outside the corral, trailed in to the barn alone. He sacked oats for the stallion, found matches on a sill that were kept there to light the lantern. Then Joe was hurrying back through the corral, to mount and lash the sack of oats behind his saddle. He rode away along the rushing

stream which ran below the bench where he and Buck had built.

An hour later he stopped in a deep pocket, picketed the stallion on lush grass, and took a ten-foot length of thin, strong line from a siddle pocket. Joe always carried the line with the small fish hook fastened to one end of it. He often stopped along here and caught a mess of trout to take home. He caught two beauties now from a green pool below a little waterfall, dressed them, and fastened them on a green stick. Joe grinned sourly when he caught himself choosing wood that would give off little smoke when he built his small fire.

"Outlawed!" He snarled the word. Bitterness welled up in his eyes, etched hard lines about his mouth.

He gave Diablo a feed of oats, then broiled and ate the two trout. Joe wanted to rest there under the trees. But something within him was prodding him like the gouge of a white-hot iron against his flesh. Thirty minutes later he was saddled again and riding up the stream.

He turned into a side canyon, worked out to a tall, heavily timbered ridge. From the lip of the ridge he looked back and down. The hard lines about his mouth deepened. His blue eyes became opaque slips, and the knuckles of his left hand showed white as he gripped the reins. Riders were swarming over the canyon down there. Across the canyon he could see them boiling over the bench where he and Buck had built their house and corrals and barn.

JOE snarled an oath, turned Diablo into the silent forest of pines. Beyond that forest lay a great talus of loose rock, which lifted up to the base of sheer, forebodingly grim cliffs. Joe headed for the great talus, rode out onto it. Even the shod hoofs of his stallion would leave little sign on that ugly slope.

Joe rode straight onto it as if intending to work directly up the vast cliffs. But he quartered off to the right once he was on the talus, followed it for half a mile, then slanted down to strike the barren rimrock of a great, blue canyon. He followed the twisting course of the canyon's rimrock for two hours, puckered eyes alert, ears straining for sounds.

Within him sounded the war-drum echo of a pulse that increased to a throbbing beat. At the head of this vast canyon lay the Tumbling V ranch. Joe had known ever since he had made that desperate bid for freedom in Caprock town that he would head for the Tumbling V.

"Maybe," he thought grimly, "I won't ride to the border, after all. When I jump Rod Vintros and Wasp Caney, the whole Tumblin' V will join in. I'll likely draw a ticket to Boot Hill. But if I can take Caney and Vintros with me, that's all I ask."

He spotted a side canyon, was close to it when his ears caught the dull throb of shod hoofs hammering stony earth. Joe stiffened, jumped his horse into a clump of cedars on the rim of the side canyon. His ears located the sound now, and his eyes flashed left, bored down into the side canyon. He stiffened, swore a gasping oath.

Three riders were tearing down the side canyon. They were still several hundred yards distant, but Joe recognized them instantly. Rod Vintros, Wasp Caney and Pig Grady. The three were riding hell-for-leather, and their horses looked in bad shape. Joe reckoned the three had left the posse, and were cutting for the home ranch, to bring out all Tumbling V hands.

Even as he thought those things, Joe Tandy was hurtling his stallion down a deer trail, which struck the main canyon where that side draw emptied out into a grassy, open glade, There was a hellish grin on Joe Tandy's face when he hit the floor of the main canyon, leaped from the saddle, and shunted his horse into the shelter of a big rock.

He crouched beside the rock, listening to the beat of hoofs coming rapidly closer. Then he could see the three

riders. Their face were strained, pale. But Joe Tandy had no time to wonder why Rod Vintros and his two most poisonous gunmen were uneasy as they rode for home.

Joe waited until the three spilled from the mouth of the side draw. He let them get well out into the open glade before him. Then he walked into view, hands hanging at his sides, a hellish grin that held no mirth twisting his lips.

THE three riders bawled oaths in the same breath, sawed back on reins. They were three to the lank youngster's one. Yet something in Joe Tandy's blazing eyes and hellish grin struck cold dread to the hearts of the renegade trio.

"You murdered my pardner, put me outside the law." Joe's voice was as dry and deadly as the whirr of a diamond back's rattles. "And now I aim to deal out a law that you cabrons can savvy. Powdersmoke law. Draw, damn you!"

Rod Vintros and his two hirelings drew. Their movements were jerky from shaking nerves, yet blindingly swift. Joe Tandy's hands rocked down, up. Joe's eyes were focused on Wasp Caney.

Joe was thinking of old Buck Neal when his lean thumbs flicked back spiked hammers, let them fall. Caney's guns exploded, dropped from his hands. His mouth flew open, a look of pain and terror struck across his face, shone from his eyes. From his open mouth shrilled a scream as his blue veined hands clamped to his stomach, began digging.

Joe Tandy saw that much. Then his eyes and guns were shifting. A mighty hand seemed to strike his upper left arm. He heard the gun thud from his fingers, saw the arm twist queerly, heard the dull grinding of broken bone under torn flesh. But he felt no pain at the moment. His right hand gun spewed flame-split thunder, and the next instant he was staggering from the pain of a bullet torn cheek.

But even as he staggered Joe saw Pig Grady rear back, fall to the ground where Wasp Caney lay screaming for help. A bullet had hit Pig Grady full in the face. His face was not a pretty sight.

Rod Vintros was rearing his horse, roaring oaths as he fired past the animal's wet neck. The slug took Joe Tandy in the left thigh, knocked that leg from under him. Joe fell hard, face rooting sand and grass. But he propped himself up, grinning through the smear of blood and sweat and grit that turned his features into a devilish mask. His eyes were like new ice when he lifted his body to a sitting position, brought his right hand gun up and forward.

Rod Vintros had wheeled his horse, was streaking away towards heavy timber. But he twisted in the saddle, shoe-button eyes red rimmed with hate as he leveled a gun for a final shot. Vintros opened his thick, wet lips in a snarling grin, taking careful aim.

Joe Tandy's gun seemed barely to point, then flame. Rod Vintros's huge teeth disappeared like blasted pottery. Blood gushed from his mouth. Then he hit the ground, rolled limply, and came to a halt, twitching in death.

Joe Tandy tried to get his feet under him, but that left leg would not support his weight. Over the sobbing moans of Wasp Caney came the roaring thunder of riders pouring down the side canyon. Joe Tandy laughed crazily, began crawling towards Wasp Caney.

"I'll dig a grave with this one hand, damn you!" Joe Tandy's voice was shrill, unnatural. "Caney, I'll bury you like you buried Buck. I'll bury you before you quit breathin'." Though even as he said it he knew he couldn't.

Caney's screams became shriller, then ended as a convulsion seized him.

Things went black for a moment,

and Joe Tandy dropped face down. But a roaring sound that he faintly recognized as the pound of hoofs and the voices of men kept disturbing him when he felt like sleeping. Then something very strong and hot burned his throat. Joe had barely wits enough to hold his breath, gulp until his throat felt raw. Then cold water was washing his face, and he felt the horrible pain of that broken arm as some one splinted it. His thigh was bound and his arm ineffective in clumsy splints when his eyes opened slowly, lost their film.

JOE was staring up into the drawn and anxious face of old Fred Everett, the stable owner. A bottle was pressed to Joe's lips, and he drank deeply once more. After that his flagging nerves steadied, whipped up. Mind clear now he glanced around at the wide circle of set, grim faces. Joe's eyes came to rest on the sweaty countenance of the sheriff.

"Well, Hale, you and your young army win," Joe gritted. "Take me back and hang me high as you please. But you'll play hell revivin' Vintros and his renegade friends."

"Steady, son," old Fred Everett said quietly. "Reason Sooner Hale looks so boogered is because a bunch o' townsmen jarred some sense into him. Me an' some more fellers found Monk Baker locked in a cell where yuh left 'im. Monk got scared as hell when we mentioned hangin' him, an' give up head like a roped dogie. The only thing the law wants yuh for, son, is to thank yuh for cleanin' out a nest o' sidewinders."

"You—mean—I ain't under arrest?" Joe asked slowly.

"Not any," the big sheriff said hastily. "Everett an' some others overtook me an' my posse over at your place, Joe. They—they told me what was what. Rod Vintros an' them other two you downed here made a run for it right then, for they had joined the posse. We was tryin' to catch the sons when you saved us the chore."

Joe could only nod. He swallowed hard, closed his eyes as he lay back on the cool ground. "I won't have to pull stakes after all," he said huskily. "I'll go back, and build the Circle 5 into the kind of a spread Buck and me had planned. But I still don't see why Vintros wanted to do murder just for our range."

"I was a bronc twister on yore dad's Cross 7 down in Lincoln county," old Fred Everett said in a voice that reached only Joe's ears. "Yore daddy kilt Trig Vintros, Billy the Kid's squinch-eyed runnin' mate. Trig Vintros was Rod's daddy, Joe. But that's enough to clear things up for yuh right now. Someday, boy, I'll tell yuh the whole story. Buck an' me figgered that Rod Vintros would behave, an' that yuh didn't need to know why he hated yuh. But Buck an' me was wrong. We should 'a' savvied that nothin' short o' powder an' lead would ever make a Vintros behave."

"You and Buck Neal were pards, eh?" Joe asked thoughtfully.

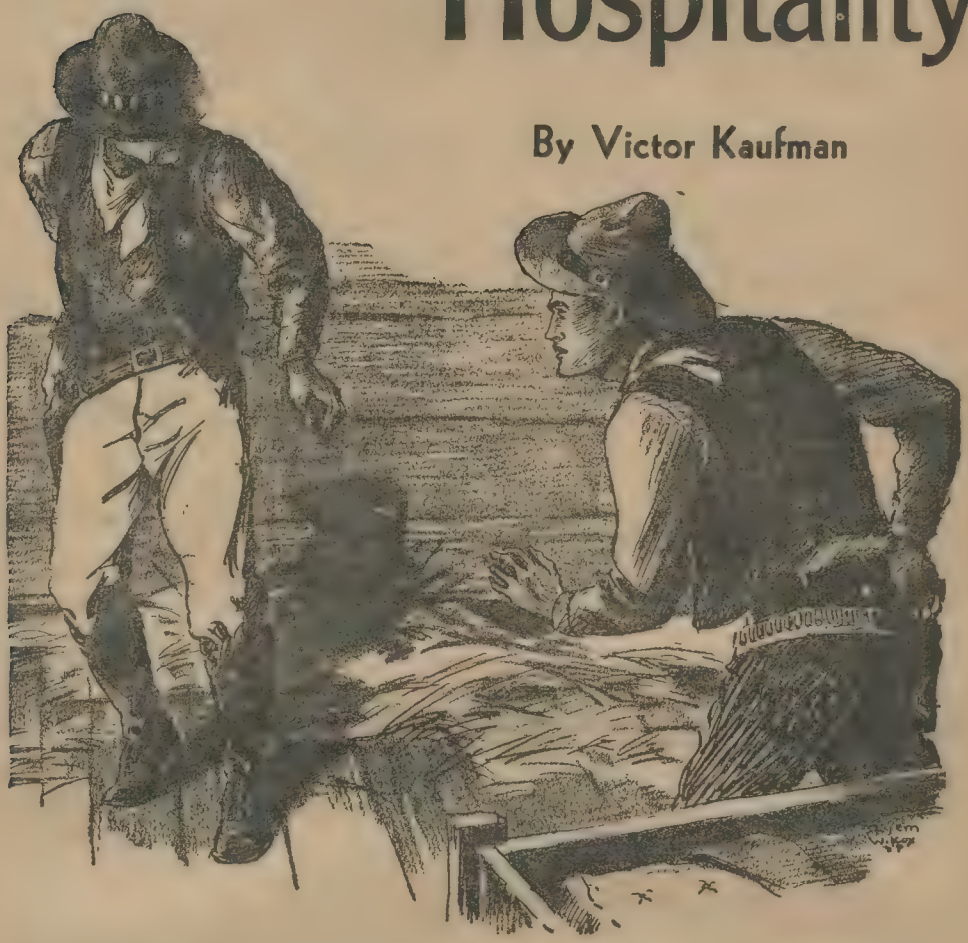
"I reckon we was mighty close, son," the stableman said huskily. "Though we didn't tell about our workin' together once just in case Rod Vintros should make trouble. One of us wanted to stay by you."

"Listen, Fred," Joe Tandy said after a long pause. "Sell that barn of yours in town. And—and throw in with me. Between us, Fred, we can make the Circle 5 a spread worth ownin'. Will you do it?"

Fred Everett's old eyes were misted. He was afraid to trust his voice just then as he sat hunkered beside the lean youngster. But Fred Everett's white head nodded slowly. And the smile which touched Joe Tandy's lips was one of genuine happiness.

Hangman's Hospitality

By Victor Kaufman



Dan Brill couldn't let his crippled kid brother substitute for him as noose fodder. But when he tried to gun-prove it was all a drygulcher's frameup—he drew trigger talk that foretold there would be two Brills in boot hill.

THE hard, threatening muzzle of a .45 jabbed into Dan Brill's back, the prod of the steel stopping him just inside the dark doorway of the Sage City stable. Brill stiffened. He crooked a muscular hand towards the holster slung low around his own slim hips.

"Don't try it, kid—" The voice struck from the black shadows with

a silky threat. "Just lift your hands an' come along nice an' peaceable!"

Brill let out a long breath. His tone was faintly puzzled. "Sheriff Talbert?"

"Who do you reckon?" That answer was grim and the gun jabbed against Brill with a force plainly threatening. "Lift 'em, I say! You're under arrest, Brill—for murder!"

The young rancher's head snapped around; dim moonlight from the outside street touched a face turned somberly astounded.

"Murder? What'n hell—?"

Sheriff Talbert's small form jerked back, betraying the nervousness he felt. "Stand still, damn you! Won't do no good to start trouble—" His left hand snaked out to jerk Brill's gun from its holster. After that, Talbert's voice resumed in an evener tone: "Go on! Just march across to my office—an' I warn you anything you say'll be used again' you!"

Brill's teeth clicked together for a silent moment. Then a low, grim laugh came from him. There was no sense to this thing—yet he felt a dark and somber foreboding that he could not quite understand. Long training in trouble had done this; had made him ready for misfortune at every turn.

"Go on!" Talbert growled waspishly.

Brill turned streetward without speaking. But he thought plenty as he paced across the deep, moon-streaked dust of Sage City's single street. "Another Flying-G trick," he told himself. "Another framed deal of some kind! Why'n hell can't Gordon leave me an' Tom alone?"

Talbert's gun prodded his ribs again. "Easy now! Just walk right in. An' be careful. There's men inside."

The sheriff's office was a low dark building set back from the street. Brill passed through the door and came into a sudden glare of light that beat against his eyes with blinding force. When his vision cleared he saw two men crouched behind Talbert's long desk; the sight of them quirked Brill's lips into a cold grin.

So this was the answer—even as he had expected! That tall and swarthy man was Vash Striker, foreman of Gordon's Flying-G outfit. The shorter one, with the bulky outthrust jaw, was Mugs Ragin, one of the Flying-G punchers. Both were his enemies.

For almost two years the relentless fight had gone on. Gordon's Flying-G, largest cow outfit on this spur of the high desert, had forced out almost every other small rancher. Brill was left—Brill and his crippled brother, Tom. Now—

"So you got 'im, eh?" Vash Striker's narrowed gaze swung across Brill's raw-boned form with obvious satisfaction.

Talbert grunted. He holstered his gun, tossed Brill's .45 onto the desk. Then he sank wearily into his chair and scowled up at Brill from under the bushy line of his brows.

"What you got to say for yourself?"

Brill laughed grimly. "You might tell me what this's all about."

VASH STRIKER smiled—an expression that was a warning to Brill. He knew this man. Vash would not smile thusly unless he was solidly sure of himself.

"Don't act innocent!" Vash Striker came forward a step. "Won't do you no good. We found Gordon right where—"

"Gordon!" Brill's eyes ripped wide open. "Good heaven! You mean—"

"Gordon's dead, yeah!" Talbert's stubble-covered jaw thrust out. "Was found buried under some brush on your land—shot in the back!"

Brill stared, a cold and numbing dread shooting all through him. Henry Gordon—dead!

"An' you're saying I killed him? That it?"

Striker snorted. "So you get wise, eh? Hell! Who else but a damn nester would shoot a man in the back?"

Brill's lips pressed tight for a moment of chilled silence. Then his eyes snapped with a sudden fighting light and his voice came harshly strident: "Your thinking is twisted, Vash! I'm no nester an' you know it. I'm as much a cowman as—"

"What's the difference?" Talbert flapped his hands in irritation. "Nester or cowman—what's the difference? There's been bad blood between you an' the Flying-G for a long time. Now Gordon's been killed—buried under brush on that strip of land around Skull Spring." Talbert's eyes narrowed accusingly. "He ordered you off that land—didn't he?"

Brill's lips twisted in a bitter smile. "Yeah. But there was a reason for that, Talbert. An' there was a reason for all the other trouble. It had nothing to do with water or with land."

"I know." Talbert shrugged. "Gordon had a special reason for wanting you off this range. It was because of Jane."

Brill's face darkened. "Leave her out of this, Talbert!"

"Can't." Talbert's tone was laconic. "She's part of it. Gordon objected to you an' his daughter being together so much. He tried to crowd you out. Let's say he met you at Skull Spring yesterday—gave you final warning. Then he turns to ride away. What happens? Well—maybe you lose your temper. You pull a gun. Before you even think, you've shot 'im. Then you get panicky, so you pull his body into the junipers an' bury it." Talbert's thin shoulders shrugged. "That's that!"

Brill leaned over Talbert's desk, his face gone white with a seething inner anger. "You think I'd shoot a man in the back? You think I'd—"

The door opened suddenly and that squeak of sound jerked Talbert's eyes away from Brill. Vash Striker grunted a curse. Mugs Ragin, square face impassive, jerked himself around with a nervousness that was strange to him.

BRILL turned. In the open door stood a stooped and twisted figure; that of a young man whose face seemed old and tired.

"Tom!" Brill's tone softened. "You in town?"

Tom Brill smiled faintly and came limping across the room to his brother's side. Years ago, an outlaw horse had thrown this youth, trampled him almost to death. Since that time, Dan Brill's whole life had been one of devotion to a brother who could never again take care of himself.

"Yeah—I come to town, Dan. Nothing much to do out at the place." He drew a deep breath. "Over at the saloon I heard about you being accused of Gordon's killing. So I come over."

Brill smiled grimly. "Don't worry about it, Tom. It's a damn lie! They can't prove a thing!"

"No—don't reckon they can." Tom Brill's fingers twisted together; he stared down at his crippled legs for a moment. All at once, his lips pulled tight as if some decision had formed in his mind. He straightened. "No—they can't prove that you killed Gordon. It ain't true. I—I killed 'im myself!"

"Tom!" Brill's face turned ashen.

Talbert grunted in surprise. Vash Striker and Mugs Ragin exchanged dark glances.

"Yeah—" Tom's voice went evenly on. "I killed 'im, Sheriff. Ran onto 'im at Skull Spring last evening. He told me he'd run me an' Dan out of the country unless we left within twenty-four hours. He meant it, too. An' I knew my brother wouldn't fight back. How could he? No man wants to fight the father of the girl he loves. So I—"

"Tom!" Brill suddenly roused himself from the stupor of surprise this thing had thrown about him. He gripped Tom's arm and shook that twisted body with an outraged anguish. "Tom! Keep still!"

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Sheriff Talbert pulled Brill aside. "Let him talk! Damn it—let him talk!"

"You go to hell!" Brill whirled to glare at Talbert, horror and rage mingled in his eyes. "Don't listen to him! Don't do it! He's just saying all that to save me. Get this, Talbert. I killed Gordon myself!"

Vash Striker's laugh grated above Talbert's muttered curse. "So? Now we're getting some place, eh? Looks like mebbe they was both in this deal, Talbert. Thicker'n thieves, them two—" The Flying-G foreman grinned wolfishly. "Fact is, I think they are thieves! We been missiing lots of stock lately—"

"Shut up!" Talbert jumped to his feet and glared a question at Tom's stooped form. "Listen—I don't get this. Why should you kill Gordon?"

Tom's thin face turned up to the sheriff with a rigid satisfaction. "Why? 'Cause Gordon was trying to ruin Dan, that's why! The old fool was scared Dan an' Jane might get married. Only he had other ideas for her—" Tom's gaze raked towards Vash Striker's scowling features and turned openly contemptuous. "Vash would know about them."

Brill wiped a quivering hand across his eyes. "Tom!" he muttered. "You crazy—"

"Yeah." Tom's lips turned down. He nodded slowly. "I reckon I am crazy. Looks like I've messed things up plenty. But—" He stared down at the floor and sighed. "But I figgered I could help. I'm no good to anybody, Dan. I'm nothing but a damn burden—an'—well I reckon this is as good a way as any to—"

Brill's vision blurred. He stepped close to his young brother's stooped form and placed an arm across those sagging shoulders. He had meant to say something. But a long moment passed in a silence that was really more expressive than any words could have been.

TOM was first to move. He drew himself away and faced Sheriff Talbert. "Let's get it over with. Lock me up."

Talbert scowled, obviously touched by this scene. He thumbed Tom towards a barred cell door at the office's farther end. Then he stared a long time at Dan Brill's motionless figure, at last taking Brill's gun from the table and handing it back.

"I reckon," he murmured softly, "that you're free to go. But take my advice, Brill. Don't get any foolish ideas about this deal. There ain't nothing you can do."

Brill said nothing. He scarcely realized that he took that gun and slipped it back into his holster. Even the sharp coolness of the night wind that fanned his cheeks as he stepped onto the street failed to rouse him.

Tom—a killer!

The echo of Brill's dragging spurs clanked against the buildings as he turned aimlessly up the arcaded sidewalk. He reached into a shirt pocket for cigarette makings—but the smoke was sharply distasteful to him. It stuck in his throat, choking. He muttered a curse and tossed the cigarette away.

Continuing on, Brill came opposite the General Store's lighted front. He stopped here, for the first time able to think clearly.

"Something," he muttered, "is wrong about this whole deal. Something—"

The thought brought his shoulders up with a savage jerk. He wheeled to stride off towards the stable, took two quick steps—and stopped.

A girl's slender figure appeared suddenly in the store's lighted doorway; the sight of it pulled Brill's eyes sideways. He took off his sombrero. A sharp little cry came from the girl.

"Jane!" Brill whirled around towards her.

She lifted one hand, palm outward, as if to halt him. Then Brill saw the mingled grief and contempt that

clouded her soft brown eyes. He stopped.

"Jane! You don't really think—"

Jane Gordon's straight, riding-garbed figure seemed to tense. The look she gave Brill was like a physical blow.

"They—they turned you loose?"

Brill smiled bitterly, nodding. "Yes. Tom—he confessed."

"Tom!" Jane Gordon's shoulder came up; astonishment ripped across her eyes. "You mean—Tom—"

A cold rage was in Brill's voice. "No—he didn't do it, either. At least, I don't think so, Jane. He confessed to save me."

Jane Gordon swayed against the door frame, her lips all at once relaxed and quivering. "Dan—who could have done it?"

Brill shook his head somberly. "I don't know, Jane. Not yet. But I swear I'll find out."

The two of them stood silently for a long moment. There seemed nothing more to say and Brill realized that there was no way for him to break down the gnawing suspicion this girl felt. He ducked his head, murmured a "good-by" and wheeled off into the street; crossing that mantle of dust he went into the stable to get his horse.

In the saddle again, Brill turned up the street. Riding past Sheriff Lin Talbert's office, he saw that only one horse was left at the hitch-rail in front of that low building—Talbert's horse. Vash Striker and Mugs Ragin had gone.

Thought of those two turned Brill's mind sharply active again. "Somebody killed Gordon—that's the one sure thing. Who? I'd bet odds that Tom had nothing to do with it. No matter how much he knew—" Brill cursed softly. "Striker? But why should he kill his boss—the man who wanted him for a son-in-law? With Gordon alive, Striker was setting pretty. Mugs Ragin ain't got enough sense to kill a man except for the pure pleasure of killing—an' Gordon was killed for a reason. So what's the answer?"

Disturbed by these questions, Brill rode on across the moon-lighted desert and cut north across Cougar Ridge. He was heading for Skull Spring, the spot where Gordon had been shot. There, if anyplace, he might be able to find a clue.

THE line of shadowy junipers came to view at last, above them the ghost-like branches of willow trees. Brill drew down to a walk, inspecting that dip of land up ahead with a raking scrutiny. Vague premonition nagged at his mind; that faint feeling of danger made him dismount and enter the trees on foot.

Within the darker shadows, he stopped. A dead silence lay over the range about him—far off in the hills a coyote's call lifted mournfully into the stars. Reassured, Brill moved on. The faint glitter of water came to him from an opening in the trees, drawing him forward onto a stretch of bare sand.

Brill struck a match and cupped the faint flame low to search the ground. At that instant a sliver of sound struck at him from the surrounding shadows—the sharp click of a gun's hammer being cocked.

"Hell!" Brill snuffed out the match, throwing himself sideways to sprawl behind a clump of brush. A shot blasted rolling echoes through the night; the bullet gouged the spot where Brill had stood, spraying sand.

Brill jerked his own gun up, levelled a shot at the place from which that flare had come. At once, he rolled aside—and none too soon. The hidden gunman's answer came in screaming lead that tore the brush and burrowed the sand just behind.

Cursing softly, Brill got to his feet. He charged off to the right and gained a higher strip of land that was strewn with up-thrust boulders. Crouched there, he scanned the hill just across the shining expanse of the water hole.

A scurry of rocks came faintly across to him—followed by the distant stomp of hoofs. Brill straightened, half expecting a trap. He heard the echoes of that running horse lift and die. Then came silence.

"Running out," Brill muttered. "It was a sure thing he wanted. Missing that first shot made him panicky—" There came to Brill, then, a solid conviction that wheeled him back through the trees towards his horse. Mounted again, he turned along the Sage City trail.

"The fella who did that shooting is the one who killed Gordon," Brill thought. "He's after me—an' he'll try again. Next time I've got to be ready for him!"

Back in town, Brill found Talbert's office without light. The sheriff was gone and the utter darkness of the jail itself was evidence that Tom was asleep.

Brill left his horse in front, walking deliberately into a side alleyway that sheered back from the street. He struck a match and held that dim glow near the dust along the wall of the office. A slight minute's search and he found what he had expected to find—the imprints of a man's twisted foot!

"So that's it—" Brill snapped the match away with a gesture of anger. "Tom heard I was arrested. He come here an' listened. That's how he knew just where Gordon was killed!" Brill's throat lumped, making his curse a low growl of anguish. "He knew I'd not stand a chance against Flying-G in a trial—so he made up that yarn to save me! Now—"

Footsteps clumped along the farther sidewalk, drawing Brill's gaze streetward. Across near the hotel he saw Sheriff Lin Talbert's small form.

"Talbert!" Brill called.

THE man whirled with a startled gasp, one hand dropping to his holster. Never a man overburdened with courage, Talbert had lately been more nervous than usual. Brill guessed that Flying-G was applying pressure, trying hard to put the law under its thumb. Yet Talbert himself was honest enough; that conviction kept Brill's tone even. "Talbert—I want your help."

The sheriff grunted. "Help? What'n hell you mean, Brill? What kinda help?" Talbert stepped out into the street and came to a halt that was an attitude of suspicion.

"I want you to help me get the man who killed Gordon!"

Sheriff Talbert's jaw sagged. "Huh? You crazy?"

Brill shook his head grimly. And he told his story—about the dry-gulcher and about the footprints.

"Means nothing!" Talbert's tone turned irritable. "I know how you feel, Brill. But damn it, man—Tom confessed!"

"He's not guilty!" Brill snapped back. "It was Valsh Striker—or Mugs Ragin—who killed Gordon. The same man tried to kill me tonight. He'll try again. Next time I aim to be ready for him."

Talbert stared for a moment, then laughed. "Striker? You fool! Why should he kill Gordon? Or Ragin, either?" Talbert's eyes narrowed to search Brill's face with a harsh suspicion. "You trying to pull a trick on me?"

Brill's anger boiled close to the surface. "The killer will try again—an' my guess is that he'll try tonight! Next time I'm not going to let him get away."

Sheriff Talbert nodded slowly. "So? You aim to kill Striker—or Ragin—an' then claim he was the man who shot Gordon?"

"I'll make him confess!" Brill murmured. "But that'll do me no good without a witness. You'll be that witness!"

Talbert stepped back. "The hell you say! It's a trick, Brill—an' I'm not falling for it! I'll not be mixed in a framed deal. Not for you or anybody!"

Brill stood silently, watching Talbert stride off towards his rooming

house at the town's farther end. In the thin moment that followed, Brill made his decision.

"It's the long odds chance," he muttered. "It's playing with fire. But I reckon there's no other way out!"

Talbert had moved but a few feet. Brill drew his gun; his voice whipped after the sheriff with a soft caution:

"Lift 'em, Talbert!"

The man whirled, jaw slacking with mingled fear and astonishment. A still, anger-charged moment fled past.

"What'n hell—?"

Brill's voice broke above the sheriff's startled words. "Keep 'em high! Now—you're coming with me, Talbert. You'll help me out whether you want to or not!"

ALMOST an hour of waiting in the darkness of his own small ranchhouse had drawn Brill's nerves into tight quivering wires. At last he heard the sound he had expected to hear—the muffled sound of an approaching horse.

"It's him!" Brill stood up, drawing himself farther back into the room's heavy shadows. "He's come—just like I figgered he would!"

The horse stopped. For a moment there was a complete dead silence. Then the latch of the front door clicked and when the panel creaked stealthily open, Brill saw a man's figure dimly outlined by the yellow moonlight.

"Figgers I'm asleep," Brill thought grimly. Then a simmering humor went through him. "But won't he be surprised to find I've got Talbert trussed up inside the closet?"

Waiting, Brill saw the prowler's somber shadow slide across the room. He didn't move until the man came between him and a far window. Then he lifted his gun.

"Stand still!"

The figure stiffened with a harsh gasp of breath. But Brill, watching hawklike, saw that the man's gunhand did not move.

"Lift 'em!" Brill ordered sharply. "An' don't move! I can see you, fella—that window's right behind. Any tricks an' I'll blow you plumb to hell!"

The sharp, sibulant breathing of the man was the only answer. Brill struck a match and touched its flame to a small lantern on a table in the room's center. The light flared up to reveal the angrily distorted features of—Vash Striker.

Brill smiled, without mirth. "So? I was kinda expecting you, Vash."

Striker's voice was a growl: "Don't be a damn fool! Put that gun down!"

"Yeah?" Brill laughed harshly. "You just keep your hands up, Vash. An' answer a few questions—"

"Drop that gun!" The words struck Brill from the side, pulling his gaze towards an open window near the door. Striker let out a breath sharply relieved. The glinting length of a rifle barrel poked through that window—behind it was the leering face of Mugs Ragin.

"Drop it!" Mugs ordered again.

Brill obeyed slowly, the line of his lips going bitter. "The wolves travel in packs, eh? I was a fool not to guess."

Striker sneered. "When the game is big, it's better to travel in packs. I copper my bets, fella!"

"So I'm big game?"

"Sure—" Striker's laugh was like the tinkle of ice in a glass. "Bigger'n you realize, mebbe. With you gone, I reckon the Flying-G will be mine! My weddin' won't need to be delayed."

Brill paled slightly. "Think Jane'd tie up with a drygulcher?"

"Her dad wanted her to marry me, didn't he?"

A raging swirl of anger shook Brill's tensed form. "You'd marry a girl—after killing her dad?"

Striker laughed at that. "How'll she ever know? This deal is shockproof, Brill—plenty safe! Your kid brother confessed to killing Gordon. I know why he did—to save you. But he won't be able to back out of the noose now. An' I reckon we'll take

care of—" The Flying-G foreman paused, eyes suddenly drawn to the side.

Brill heard that faint noise too; it suddenly brought his heart into his throat. The closet door had rattled!

"What's that?" Striker demanded.

Brill shrugged, attempting a lightness he did not feel at all. For if Striker found Talbert — Brill's ace card was lost.

"Wind, I reckon," Brill muttered. "Go on, Striker. What you going to do with me?"

The foreman's eyes shuttled between Brill and the closet. "Who's in there?" he growled. "Come on out, damn it!"

Brill went stiff. Striker waited a moment—then paced swiftly across to the door. He jerked it open, thrust his gun inside—and suddenly cursed in surprise.

"Talbert?"

Mugs Ragin gasped from his window. "Huh? The hell you say!"

STRIKER whirled on Brill again. "So? You planned a nice trap for me, eh? Kidnaped the sheriff an' figgered to make me convict myself!" The foreman growled an oath. But the temper of his anger seemed to cool swiftly; a calculating smile sliced across his dark face.

"This is even better'n I hoped! Damned if it ain't! Brill—listen to this. Talbert—you can listen, too. We been missing stock lately from the Flying-G herds. It's a fact known to everyone in the outfit. Tonight, so we'll say, Mugs an' me got the trail of the thief. We took the sheriff out with us. There was a little lead slung. Poor Talbert got killed. But so did the rustler. An' who's to deny our story?"

Brill's lips pressed tight. Talbert, tied and gagged, glared his helpless rage as Striker pulled him from the closet.

"So that's the answer," Brill muttered. "You were lining your pockets with your boss's beef—an' Gordon caught you! But I made a good fella to lay the crime on!"

Vash Striker's grin was a taunting admission. He waved his gun towards Brill. "Move! Go on!"

Brill's eyes swept the two men, the ready guns, the bound figure of the sheriff. He shrugged. "Talbert," he said softly. "I'm damned sorry. But I reckon I got you in a bad hole."

Vash Striker shoved Talbert towards the door, then stooped to reach for Brill's gun. Mugs Ragin, apparently sure of an absolute surrender, pulled away from the window.

Brill saw both moves almost at once. This was, he knew, the one chance. Without waiting — without thinking—he made his last desperate try.

Bending swiftly, he lunged away from the cover of Sriker's gun. Sriker straightened with a curse; the .45 roared and its slug went whistling past Brill to gouge the wall just behind. In the same moment, Brill's booted foot struck the table and sent it reeling. The lantern tipped. As it crashed to the floor, a lick of oil-fed flame burst up, faintly lighting the sudden darkness.

Striker roared a wild curse. His gun barked again. Brill threw himself sideways—but too late. Searing hot pain leaped up his left side and the solid impact of that lead sent him sprawling backwards. Dimly, he heard Mugs Ragin yell. The rifle cracked close upon that shrill cry; its heavy slug tore into the boards just above Brill's head.

A slender instant's rest told Brill that his wound was not serious; blood pumped from a flesh hole just below his lower left rib. He gritted his teeth, lunged forward into a darkness already being broken by the higher lap of flame from the broken lantern.

His own gun would be on the floor; Striker had not had time to pick up the thing. Brill remembered the spot, was drawn to it like lightning to wet steel.

"Get 'im! Get 'im!" Striker was yelling hoarsely.

Brill struck the floor flat, fumbling with desperate fingers. Another shot struck booming echoes through the small room. But the heightening flames gave off little light—not enough for accurate shooting. Brill breathed a silent thanks for that as he ran his hands over the rough floor boards. But in a moment—

Ah! Brill stiffened. His fingers touched familiar steel. Clutching that gun, he sprang to his feet. Two quick stabs of flame reached out at him; one bullet hit the floor just to one side, the other slammed into the farther wall. Striker cursed again.

Brill faded swiftly back. Striker, lunging madly, charged across to reach the door. In that moment, a sudden spurt of flame from the burning floorboards etched his figure clearly.

"Striker!" Brill called.

The man wheeled around, gun snapping up. Brill's finger tightened. As the hammer dropped, he heard Striker scream. The foreman's shot, an instant too late, ploughed into the boards at Brill's feet.

Ragin's shrill angry curse came from the window. Brill whipped his .45 around, fired at the same moment Ragin sent a rifle slug at the flare of his first shot. Ragin's gun roared first—but he seemed to have his eyes half on the sagging body of Vash Striker. His shot went wide. The next second, Brill's bullet knocked him back into the outside darkness.

"Talbert!" Brill stumbled across to the sheriff's figure, sagging against the wall next to the door. He ripped the ropes from Talbert's body and tore the gag away.

Talbert began spluttering curses. Brill paid no attention; wheeling, he picked up Striker's limp body and carried it outside. As he dropped the man onto the ground, Striker groaned.

"Alive, eh?" Brill muttered grimly. "You'll live to stretch a rope!"

Sheriff Talbert was on Brill's heels. "You blamed young fool! You came damn near getting me killed, that's what! When I got excited in that there closet an' kicked the door accidental, I sure thought—"

"You heard?" Brill asked softly.

Talbert scowled down at Vash Striker. "Yeah. I heard. An' I reckon that instead of putting you in jail for kidnaping, like I oughta, I'll just forget the matter. That jail of ours is a little crowded with two people—"

Brill's fight-weary body seemed to liven. The bullet hole in his side had ceased to bleed—and anyway, it would take more than a mere flesh wound to keep Brill from making a starlight ride toward the Flying G—and Jane.

"When you turn Tommy loose," Brill murmured, "tell him he'll find me at the Flying-G. You might mention that there's no use in him being in such a damn big hurry to get there. Reckon I'll be busy for a while."

The Six-Pistol Pilgrim

By

Ralph Condon

A six-gun shadower had dogged Jeff Allen's tracks all the way from Texas. But only at the end of that tragic trail did he learn the meaning of that gunsmoke mystery —when a girl's danger forced him to play target for a back-shooting range-hog

CHAPTER I

Trouble Trail

JEFF ALLEN sorted his way down through the timber and cut the main trail where it broke into an open flat, following the tracks of the lame singlefooter that had showed now and then all the way up from Texas.

He rode with his long body hunched and his neck shortened before the cold drive of rain that was setting in with the last hour of daylight. Beyond the open space, the trail angled into a thick growth of lodgepole pines, twisted among them for a quarter of a mile and then pitched steeply down to the river. A hundred yards from the pitch-off, the rider stopped.

He saw that there was no side trail, but the man on the lame horse had turned sharply left into the pines. His passing had been so recent that the rain had not fully soaked an overturned mat of needles.

Without thinking, Jeff crowded his right foot down against the bottom of his rifle scabbard to swing the stock close to his hand. For a little, he remained tensely still. But there was nothing to be seen in the gloom under the trees and he could make out no sound other than the drip of the rain and the rumbling voice of the river that he could not see.

"Maybe this is none of my business," Jeff mused. "But this citizen travels damned funny. He's jumped the trail twice in the last five miles

to go around meadows where there were line cabins. Now he's got it in his mind to go around something else."

He started his horse with a gentle cluck and rode sharply to the right away from the trail. The thick carpet of needles muffled the sound of his horse's hoofs, lent a close, secret sound to his going. After a couple of hundred yards he drew up to listen again.

The voice of the river was closer now. The wind was rising to whine in the pinetops.

Jeff got out of the saddle and made his horse fast to a tree. With his Winchester in his hand, he went swiftly forward on foot.

The lodgepoles broke away beyond the shoulder of the bench and the Big Smoky River washed by down below. It came whitely foaming from the mouth of a narrow gorge, leveled out for a little and then went boiling and spitting again into another set of rapids. The smooth piece of water looked gray-green and bottomless in the evening light, but Jeff knew the ford was there. He could see the trail climb up again and dive into the dark wall of timber on the other side.

He got out his tobacco and built himself a smoke. When he looked up from that, a man on a black horse had come out from the trees on the far side and down to the water.

"After comin' all this way from Texas," he thought to himself, I can't afford to get riled up in no trouble before I deliver this money to Steve Carson. On the other hand, my nose is itchin' to see what this is all about."

He saw the rider below pause a moment to let his horse drink. A tense impatience showed in every line of the man. His eyes gave swift search to the woods ahead, swept the bluffs upstream and took one quick look back over his own trail. Then the next instant he dropped the reins and flung both arms high over his head. The thin cry that broke from his lips, was mingled with the dry, spiteful crack of a rifle from the top of the bluffs.

The black horse wheeled around and bolted up the bar. The rider spun down from the saddle, dragged for half a dozen jumps by one foot and then fell free to roll back into the water.

A sudden fury came to life in Jeff Allen. He spat out his unlighted cigarette and jerked back the hammer of his rifle.

The wind and rain held the smoke down but he caught one swirl of white against the leaden sky to show him where the drygulcher was hidden.

Across the river, the current had taken hold of the limp body and was pulling it swiftly toward deep water.

THE rifle on the bluff cracked wickedly again. The bullet ploughed the water a little wide of the floating form.

A man stood up clear-cut against the sky and levered a fresh shell into his gun.

Jeff Allen whipped his rifle into line and fired with a single motion.

The man above shot almost at the same instant but his slug flew wide into the timber. He stayed a moment stiffly erect, then his joints gave way all at once and pitched him down out of sight on his ledge. His rifle slid over the rim, bounced from the face of the cliff and splashed into the foaming mouth of the gorge.

Jeff swung back to the river. The floating body of the young rider was almost abreast of him. A cross current above the next set of rapids was pulling it swiftly toward his shore.

Jeff ran down through the rain-soaked brush to the river. He laid his rifle down, bent a young willow to serve as a hand hold and wallowed out into the stream waist deep.

It was only seconds before the rider of the black horse came by. He was floating deep and fast, face down.

Allen twisted his fingers in under the man's collar and threw his weight back against the current. For a moment it was a close thing. Then the water slung them both around into an

eddy against the bank and he got the limp body out onto the sand.

The rain had thickened to a steady hammer. With it, the last of the daylight was going fast.

Jeff took a swift look up the river and at the bluffs. He swore softly when he turned back to the man he'd pulled from the stream.

There was no color at all under the weather tan of the lean cheeks and the lips were bloodless. But in spite of this and the drawn lines, the face was young. The long body, too, had the lank flatness of youth.

Jeff's hands were so cold he couldn't feel any pulse or tell if the man was breathing. He laid out his own slicker as a cover and pulled the soaked shirt and coat open.

The blue-black spot of a bullet hole showed almost dead center and high up in the chest. Little frothy, red bubbles kept forming and breaking over it. The man was breathing weakly.

Jeff ran his hand around to the back but there was no blood there. The bullet hadn't come through.

Jeff pondered a moment. He knew there was a little town a mile or two beyond the river. He'd seen it from high up on the ridge that afternoon. If there was a doctor there, this young rider might be saved. The trip in might finish him but he was sure to die in the wet cold of an open camp.

HE felt the man stir a little under his hand. A pair of shock-dulled eyes opened and searched about, came to rest on Allen.

"I should have known better than to use the trail before dark with you skunks riding the country!" The words were labored and weak but they were packed with a world of disgust.

"Easy does it," Jeff soothed. "It happens that I didn't plug you, but never mind that for now. We've got to get you fixed up."

For a moment the wounded man closed his eyes as though to collect his thoughts. "All right," he agreed. "I guess you wouldn't have fished me out of the river if you had—but how in the hell do you come to be mixed in here?"

A sardonic smile twisted Jeff's lips. "Son, I ain't got that figured out yet myself. Getting you into town seems to be the big hump for right now. Do you think you can stand it?"

Something stirred across the gray face. "Fella, if there's any luck left and you are on the square, don't take me to town!"

"Well, hell," Jeff pointed out, "you can't lie out, the shape you're in. There's a bullet in you that's got to be dug out by a doctor."

The bloodless lips drew into a hard, straight line. For a moment the wounded youth searched Jeff's eyes, then he nodded.

"I guess you're square, all right. And if you're a guy that knows what's good for him, you'd gather your horse and ride the hell out of this country!"

Jeff didn't say anything.

"But if you're one of them guys that don't know what's good for him, you likely won't go." The hint of a reckless smile jerked at the rider's face.

Jeff grinned back and said: "You'd better shut up. You're talking a lot more than's good for you."

"Sure I am," the man agreed. "But I'll likely pass out in a little while and I've got some things to say. I can't go back to town. That's out! If folks knew for sure that I'd been shot, things would blow all to hell around here and a lot of good boys would get killed. I got to keep 'em from knowing for a little while."

Jeff shifted. "Well?"

"There's an old cabin off in the woods about a half mile," the man said thinly. "It's on the first little side stream below here. Not many folks know where it is—but you look like a guy that could find it."

"I could look," Jeff replied gravely.

The smile showed faintly again on the drawn face. "Mister, you're a plumb damned fool to get mixed in

this thing but I sure like the kind of noises you make. Old Doc Taylor over in Powderhorn—he knows where this cabin is. You tell him that—"

The man's eyes drooped shut. Relaxing jaw muscles told of a merciful unconsciousness.

Jeff brought his horse down from the timber and got the limp body into the saddle. He walked alongside to steady him and started down the river in what little light was left.

A half mile down, a little side stream came dashing down. Jeff turned up that. He took his time and picked his way in the rougher going.

The rain had settled in hard and thick. Jeff was cold and soaked. His awkward high-heeled boots squelched water at every step but he kept doggedly on.

After a time he came to a place where the darker black of the trees no longer showed against the leaden sky. He dropped his reins, said: "Whoa, boy," and went on alone.

Fifty feet beyond, he bumped against something and grunted. It was a rotten stump and he knew he was in some sort of a clearing. That cabin would be close by.

Jeff could hear the little creek below him and could see the slope rise sharply beyond it. He grunted again and went back a little toward the timber. Folks mostly roll logs down hill to build a cabin.

When he could see the trees again, he knew he must be pretty near. Then that musty scent of wet, abandoned places struck his nostrils and his reaching hands found the mossy logs of a wall.

The slab door was closed but it gave before his shove and he went inside. Cold fingers gave him some trouble with his waterproof case but he got a match going at last and looked around.

The place was damp and very small but it was in good shape. There was one bunk, two box chairs, a table and a fireplace that the pack rats had filled up with sticks and rubbish. Somebody had left wood stacked on the hearth.

Jeff set fire to the rat's nest and heaped on some of the logs. He waited until he was sure that it was going to go, then went back to bring his horse.

He got the wounded man into the house, stripped off his clothes and wrapped him in dry blankets. From his saddlebag, he got a bottle of whiskey and forced a long drink between the blue lips. He made a hasty search of the unconscious man, but found nothing pointing to his identity. Then he kicked the fire down into shape, piled on the heaviest of the wood and went out into the rain-black night.

"Come on, horse," he grunted and climbed wearily into the saddle. "We're going to go to town."

CHAPTER II

Barroom Tangle

YELLOW lamplight, rain-fused and cheerless, struck into Powderhorn's main street. Water from the roof gutters ran down across the board walks to thin the hock-deep mud that sucked at the hoofs of Jeff Allen's horse.

Jeff had seen plenty of tough little pay-day towns. He'd seen enough of them to know instantly that something was wrong with this one. There wasn't enough noise.

A lot of the buildings weren't lighted. And a lot of them that were, had the blinds pulled down tight.

The rain-soaked rider kept his face straight ahead, held to the middle of the street. He came abreast of the Big Smoky Hotel and Bar. A man showed for a moment framed against the light, then he caught the splash of hoofs and flung back out of sight through the swinging doors.

Jeff kept steadily on. He saw that the wagon shed next to the hotel was filled with saddled horses. When he reached the far end of town, he hadn't seen any doctor's sign, so he turned

around and rode back to the livery stable a few doors from the hotel.

There was a kerosene lantern on a peg by the first box but there wasn't anybody in sight. Jeff took the lantern and led his horse through to the back. Every stall was filled but the last two. Most of the horses were saddled.

The rain made a steady whine on the tin roof as Jeff pulled off his rig and gave his sorrel a quick rubdown. He cleaned out the manger and threw in fresh hay. Then he took the lantern back to its peg and went down the street to the Big Smoky Bar.

As he passed the wagon shed, the smell of wet leather and horses was heavy in the air. The red eye of a cigarette gleamed for an instant to show where some man was standing in the deeper shadows. High tension danger was as clean-cut and real as the cold bite of rain that lashed down.

Jeff pushed open the swinging hotel doors and went in.

THE big room was lighted by a dozen wall lamps. The heat of each one built a little swirling eddy of tobacco smoke above it.

The gambling equipment was at the left. A few of the green-topped tables had cards and chips scattered across them, but nobody was playing and nobody was sitting there. A couple of hard, wooden chairs lay tipped over on the floor.

A heavy brass-railed bar spread the full width of the back wall. And along that bar, stood eleven wary, bleak-faced men. Every one of the eleven was watching Jeff Allen with an unshifting hostility. He had to find out where the doctor lived, but he had to go slow or he'd give the wounded youth away.

Jeff tilted his head forward to let the water run from the rim of his sodden hat as he went down the room. The sound of his boots was loud and jarring in the stillness.

The widest place left at the bar was between a tall, sardonic looking man of sixty and a barrel-chested giant of about half his years. Jeff knew instinctively that this place had been left for him. He slid easily into it and said to the barkeeper:

"It's one hell of a night to be riding out. Give me a double hooker of whiskey."

The barkeeper stood stock still for a moment. Then he licked his lips and set out a bottle and glass.

In dead silence, Jeff poured out a shot and set the bottle down.

The bartender licked his thick lips again and then jerked back as the big man on Jeff's left barked an oath and swept both the bottle and the full glass off onto the floor.

"Damn you, no! You'll declare yourself before you drink in here!"

Jeff's hands were resting on the edge of the bar. He left them there when he turned around to grin cheerfully at the man.

"The minute I laid eyes on you, I knew you were the hasty type," he said. "You hasty guys all look alike and you can always be counted on to do some damn fool thing. But I'm different. I ain't hasty so it kind of leaves you up in the air. You expected me to spin around and throw a haymaker at you—and when I didn't, you feel kind of flat and silly. And you don't know just what to do next."

The slow red of fury crept up the man's neck and across his jaw. He straightened from his crouch and let his tensely held breath go as he sought words.

When the breath was all the way out, Jeff Allen struck. He simply skidded his right fist off the bar and the full power of his shoulder buried it wrist-deep in the stomach. The force of the blow snapped the man double like a jackknife, and as the head shot forward, Jeff exploded a terrific left on the sagging jaw!

The man went down in the loose-jointed spraddle of a dropped puppet. He lay very still with his face in

the sawdust and whiskey where the bottle had spilled.

But Jeff Allen never stopped to watch him fall. From the corner of his eye, he saw the bartender reach down for something. He let the force of his last blow carry him half around. He slapped the top of the bar lightly with both hands as he vaulted feet first across it. The driving force of his boots caught the rising saloonman full in the face. A sawed-off shotgun went spinning from his hands as he crashed backward into a falling heap of bottles and glasses.

JEFF took the stubby ten-gauge from the air as he spun around and jammed its muzzle hard against the ribs of the tall, sardonic man who had been on his right.

For an instant, there was a slight stir along the line of men but they stilled when Jeff said harshly:

"If anybody moves, I'll blow this scissor-bill straight to hell!"

The tall man beyond the gun turned his head a little so that he could look at Jeff, but he didn't move his body at all. His face was grim and hard, still there was no sign of fear about him. For a moment he seemed undecided. Then he shrugged and said gravely:

"Ten seconds ago, I wouldn't have believed that one man could do it. You handle yourself well, stranger. But you've got no call to name me a scissor-bill."

"I'm sorry," Jeff said. "Throwing my drink down made me a little mad. There didn't seem to be no call for it."

The tall man glanced down to the spraddled heap at his feet. The faintest hint of a smile marked his thin lips.

"It's like you said; Oliver is apt to be hasty when things get tight. But from the look of him, he don't owe you nothing."

"The hell, he don't," Jeff said bitterly. "I broke my hand on the damned fool!"

The older man said no word to that but after a moment he grunted: "Well, let's get on to business. What's your play?"

"Play, hell," Jeff snapped. "I got no play other than the drink I set out to get and a doctor to fix my left hand!"

The other man faced around a little toward Jeff. "Are you telling me you just came in here to get a drink and ease out again?" he demanded incredulously.

"I ain't telling you nothing," Jeff said bluntly. "It's none of your damn business! I don't know what particular kind of hell you guys are raising around here, but just because I won't set still to be shot off a limb, don't mean that I want any part of it!"

"Maybe I'm on the wrong end of the gun to be telling you what to do," the older man declared, "but I'm going to do it. If this one-man show of yours is an idea of a good way to get yourself planted on our payroll, you're crazy as hell. If you're the drifting saddle tramp you'd like us to believe you are, you'd better keep going. The Smoke River country it a mighty bad place for strangers and when Oliver comes back to life, it's going to be extra bad for you. He ain't going to take this laying down!"

"I rode the length of your town and gathered up some impressions," said Jeff. "You might need your guns and I'm no hand to fritter in other men's business. Keep your guns, but just say the word and this act is over. I've settled for my drink being spilled."

The other man looked straight at Jeff for a long moment, then nodded. "If you're playing a game, you're too damned deep and smooth for me. I agree. The act is over."

Jeff took the sawed-off shotgun and dropped it into a garbage barrel. He turned his back full on the line of men while he poured himself a drink of whiskey and tossed it off. Then he put fifty cents down beside the empty

glass and went around the end of the bar. He had his left hand thrust down deep in his pocket.

"If you've got a doctor in this town, I'll tell him about that bartender's face after he's fixed my hand."

Doc Taylor lives in his office right across the street," the tall man told him gravely. "I guess that barkeep will be all right. He's likely been kicked before."

"All right," Jeff said and turned around to walk down the room. He heard a shifting of boots behind him and just as he reached the swinging doors a man said with suppressed fury:

"I guess it was the only thing to do, Rex, but don't forget that this guy's boots are still squelching water from the river trail and he left his rig in the stable with the gunslinger's outfit!"

CHAPTER III

Mistaken Fists

THERE was a glow of light behind the shades on the second floor of the building across the way. Jeff went over and felt his way up a narrow flight of stairs.

There was a little landing at the top and he stood there for a moment listening but there were no sounds to guide him. He struck a match. The cupped flame showed him a doctor's plate on one of the three doors and he rapped softly there. Somebody said: "All right," so he went in and closed the door after him.

There was a thin, wiry little man with a shock of very white hair sitting at a table across the room.

"You are Doctor Taylor?"

The little man got up and laid his open book on the table. "Yes. Excuse me for calling out, I took you to to be the boy from the restaurant bringing in my supper. What can I do for you?"

"I've busted my hand," Jeff said. "Maybe you could fix it."

"Of course. Come over here in the light and let me look at it."

Jeff went across and held his hand out under the lamp. The old doctor picked it up and felt it over with quick, sure fingers. Then he dropped it and said softly:

"That hand is not broken."

"Maybe I was wrong," Jeff said gravely. "It's better now."

Something flickered in the doctor's eyes. "Yes," he said. "I think it will be all right now." He went swiftly across the room and pulled open the door. After one brief look, he closed it again and came back to Jeff Allen. "All right. Where is he?"

Jeff took off his hat and shoved the damp hair back from his forehead. "A sort of a youngish, tallish fellow—"

Doctor Taylor shook his head impatiently. "Never mind. I know that Steve Carson's black horse came in at dark without a rider. The whole damned town knows it and is ready to blow wide open. What I want to know is, where have you got him and how bad is he hurt? You ain't calling a doctor for a man that's already dead."

"I came in from the south," Jeff said. "About two miles back, I forded a river. There was a cabin on a little side creek half a mile down from the ford. This tallish fellow—he's in that cabin. He was centered high up in the chest and the bullet didn't come out the back."

"It's the old cabin on the Birdtail," the old doctor said. "I know the place and I'll go at once. Until I get back, you'd better keep this under your hat. There's nothing to be gained by throwing the match in the powder right now."

"Well," Jeff said dryly, "I didn't have it in my mind to say it around a whole lot."

Taylor gave his caller a quick look. "I was just thinking out loud, son. There's no sidekick of Steve Carson's ever sawed off the limb he was sitting on. He don't pick that kind."

Jeff watched the old doctor's preparations for a moment, in silence. The straight line of his lips broke into a half grin. "Everybody in this country is as crazy as a pet coon," he observed. "Did you want me to ride out with you?"

"You know better than that," Taylor snapped. "You're going to spend your time circulating around being seen and discussed while I make a sneak for it."

"I just had two blankets and a waterproof on my saddle," Jeff said. "I wrapped him in those and poured some whiskey down him."

"All right," the old man grunted. "You get going now."

"Sure," Jeff agreed and went out. He was smiling grimly as he started down the stairs. "So that was Steve Carson! Well I'll be damned!"

Down from where Allen had started in Texas, Steve Carson's father lay wounded. Somebody had drygulched him when they thought he carried the cash which Jeff Allen and his uncle owed him for his trail herd. Only the cash hadn't been turned over yet. Now Jeff Allen had come to hand the money over to Steve Carson so he could make the payments on land patents which Steve's father had told him had to be met by the end of the month. Now it looked like it might not be so easy to turn the money over to the younger Carson.

JEFF paused in the hall at the bottom of the stairway. He heard the splash of hoofs coming along the street and watched as two riders went by. They had their heads hunched down against the storm and the light was too faint to show many details, but Jeff could see enough to set his muscles up hard.

One of the two horses passing in the street was a white singlefooter—and it was lame! The men were headed south toward the river trail.

Jeff got out his tobacco and built a smoke while his mind dealt with this new fact. If the drygulcher on the bluffs hadn't been the wary rider of the singlefooter, it likely meant that there had been a witness to the evening gunplay at the river. If word had been brought concerning Jeff, it would tend to explain his explosive reception at the Big Smoky Bar.

By the time he had finished rolling his smoke, the sound of the night riders had died entirely away. He put the cigarette between his lips and got out his match case. A voice said softly from very close by:

"Don't light that."

"You know, wet weather is funny," Jeff grunted. "Now I could hear you breathing as plain as day, but I'd have sworn you were on my left."

"Well I'm not—and I've got a gun within two feet of you!"

There was some faintly disturbing quality to the voice. Something that Jeff didn't understand.

"You sound kind of young and scared to me, fella," he observed. "Why don't you call this whole thing off and go home?"

"You'll do as I say or get shot! I've got you covered with my gun!"

Jeff caught a quick note of desperation in the words and chuckled. "Now what the hell kind of talk is that to make? If you'd been going to plug me, you'd have done it when I first came down. If you just want to talk, why don't you go along while I eat my supper?"

"You're not going to move an inch until you tell me what you've done with Steve!"

"You're going about this wrong, sonny," Jeff said. "You ought to try kindness on me. You could start by letting me light this moke I rolled while I was listening to you pant."

"If you light a match, I'll kill you! Now once more—where have you got Steve?"

"You know what I think?" Jeff said. "I think you're as crazy as hell and are trying to bluff this thing through without having a gun at all! You've been a heap too anxious to tell me just where your gun was and what

you were going to do with it. Now you're scared to death that I'll light a match and show you up."

"If you move I'll—"

"Oh, hell," Jeff exploded." You're delaying my supper!

He swung around and struck out with both open hands! His left cut down in a chopping swing that struck an outstretched arm to one side and the heel of his open right crackled like a bursting bag across a jaw.

The blow carried the hidden speaker into a sprawled heap at the side of the hall.

"I tried to show you a way out of that," Jeff said peevishly. "But you would stick your head out the window."

HE listened a moment and when he didn't hear anything moving in the street, he struck a match. He turned the cupped flame about and stooped down to take a look.

After one quick glance, he snuffed out the flame and said: "Well I'll be damned!" It was a slim, white-faced girl that lay on the damp floor of the passage.

Jeff's brief look had been enough to impress him with the delicate lines of the girl's face and the youthful grace of her body. He'd seen a little line of blood starting from her parted lips but he didn't think she was much hurt. She was likely only stunned with her mouth cut against her teeth but he felt as if he'd wounded her mortally.

Jeff dropped to his knees. He found the girl's shoulders in the darkness and lifted her gently to a sitting position. Her head fell limply against him and he swore softly as the living warmth of her hair brushed his jaw.

"Of all the damned luck I—" he checked himself and stiffened.

The girl groaned and moved a little with returning consciousness. But it was some noise in the street that held Jeff Allen's attention. After a little, he made it out. It was the tramp of boots coming down the board walk. He couldn't be sure how many were coming.

Jeff pulled the girl over against him with his left arm and checked the freedom of his Colt's with his right.

The blur of bodies showed against the dim light of the street and somebody said guardedly:

"This is the place."

"All right," another ordered. "Get in off the street."

Three men crowded into the entrance and paused to take a cautious look behind them.

"What'll we do, Fargo?" the third man demanded. "Shall we go up after her or wait here?"

"Wait, hell!" snapped the man who had ordered them in from the street. "Seconds count now. We've got to get this dame and be long gone! Curt, you can watch here while Fat and I go up. We'll take her down the back stairs to the horses."

CHAPTER IV

HELL'S CROSSING

JEFF felt the girl stiffen against him and he knew that she was conscious and listening. He gave her arm a steadying pressure and loosened his gun a little in its sheath. The girl apparently trusted him, for she kept quiet.

"I'd take it easy," warned the little man who had pointed out the place. His voice was thin with nervousness. "That guy is apt to start shooting damned fast!"

Fargo said contemptuously: "He's likely gone by now. But if he ain't, who the hell's afraid of an old pill-roller?"

"It's the other guy I'm thinking about," Curt told him. "He sounds plenty tough to me."

Fargo swung around and his voice was like a rasp. "What other guy?"

"I mean the guy from Texas!" the little man squeaked. "I mean the guy that Joe saw kill Dutch Mike and pull Steve Carson out of the river. He

went up to the Doc's office about five minutes ahead of the girl!"

With a furious oath, Fargo seized the man by the front of his coat and jerked him half from the floor. "You damn brainless little fool! What kind of a game are you playing? Why didn't you tell us that hell-bender was up there?"

"I was sent to watch for the girl," Curt shrilled. "Nobody told me to—"

"Shut your damn yelping!" Fargo snarled and struck him viciously across the face with his open hand. "Here our last chance to beat them out is with the girl. And you ain't got sense enough to tell us this guy is in there with her. You'll be damn lucky if the boss don't carve your guts out!"

"Well, why didn't Joe blast him out on the trail?" the little man whimpered. "He had all the way from Texas. He even seen the shooting back at the river and passed up his chance. I wouldn't trust that guy to—"

Fargo struck him again. "Shut up! Never mind what you think of Joe. He tried plenty of times to get this guy along the trail but he's a smart hombre. Back at the river, it was getting too dark to make a hit. Joe'd have been a damn fool to take a chance and give his hand away. This Texas hard guy don't know yet that anybody seen the shooting!"

Out in the street, there sounded the splash of many hoofs.

The three men at the entrance to the hall went still. Against the faint light, Jeff saw them crouch and draw their guns.

A lot of riders went by in the rain. Jeff could see their blurred shapes but he couldn't tell how many there were. But he could tell that they were coming from the wagon shed next to the Big Smoky Hotel.

For a long moment after the last sound of the horsemen had died away, not one of the men at the entrance moved a muscle. Then Fargo breathed:

"It's Carson's bunch of suckers. They're moving out."

"I'd think they'd be headed south to help Steve Carson," Curt said dully. "I'd think—"

"What the hell would make you think they'd be headed south?" Fat said disgustedly. "They got no idea that Joe seen the shooting and knows where the Texas guy took Carson. As far as they know, he's all hid and safe with a doctor on the way."

"The doctor ain't the only guy that's on the way," Fargo said and laughed. "When the boss gets done with Steve Carson, he'll wish to hell he'd been left in the river!"

"Well, we still ain't got the dame," Fat pointed out. "I make it a guess that this Texas bucko went out the back way with the doc and the girl's up there alone. Taylor's always been on their side of the fence. She might think it was a safe place to hide."

"All right," Fargo said. "The runt can stay here. I'll give you a couple of minutes to get around to the back before I go up."

"Sure," Fat said and went out into the rainy night.

JEFF moved his face into the soft hair over the girl's ear and said in the faintest whisper: "Nan Carson, you stay on the floor. You hear?"

He felt her nod her head ever so slightly. Then he heard Fargo speak again.

"If we've guessed wrong and there's shooting," Fargo directed, "you stay here and don't let nobody through. We've got to get this dame before that bunch gets home and finds she ain't at the ranch."

"I'll hold 'em," Curt promised fiercely and Fargo laughed contemptuously at him, called him a foul name to hide his own nervousness.

Jeff used the sound of the talk as a cover while he pushed the girl flat on the floor. He waited a moment more to let Fat get around out of the way, then he put his left hand up in

front of his mouth to confuse the direction of his voice and said flatly:

"You guys get your hands up!"

Curt's ragged nerves exploded on him and he spun around with a squeal of terror, pulled his gun and fired wildly without aim.

Jeff saw Fargo's hand lick swiftly down and up and shot deliberately toward the thick of the man's body.

Fargo shot once as he went down and once more after he hit the floor but his control was gone and the slugs were high and wild.

Jeff shot him again to make sure and then swung toward the other man. But Curt was staggering toward the street on fear-stumbling legs and Jeff Allen let him go.

Somewhere down the street, there sounded a wild shout. Then another and still another.

Jeff bounded back to the girl who was already on her feet.

"Do you know the back way out of here?"

'Of course. Are you all right?"

"Never touched. Let's go."

Without a second's hesitation or a word of question, the girl led the way upstairs on the run.

Jeff passed her at the top and went into Taylor's office in the lead, gun ready. But there was nobody there. The lamp was still burning on the table.

For an instant the two stood close together listening.

There was the sound of running feet coming faintly from the street.

The fat one is out in back," Jeff said laconically. "I guess we'll have to take the horses away from him."

"He'll have the advantage," the girl said breathlessly. "You'll have to be careful."

"We'll fix him," Jeff snapped. "Where are the stairs?"

"This way." The girl ran through the bedroom at the back and stopped at the head of a narrow stairway.

"You wait a second now," Jeff said. "You can't ride out in the weather like that." He ducked back into the doctor's office and a moment later came back with a heavy coat and a wide-brimmed hat.

"You follow about ten feet behind," he directed as he jammed new loads into his gun and pulled open the door at the stairhead.

"Wait—you carry me and I'll fight back. He'll think it's the other man bringing me down!"

A grunt of respect for her cunning passed by Jeff's lips as he swept her from the floor with his left hand and started down.

Nan Carson broke into a shrieking babble of protest as they went. She struck him again and again with both hands and the sound of the blows rang out clear and sharp above his footsteps.

Jeff's face and neck stung from the force of the sham attack but he grinned at the manner in which she made sure to keep clear of his eyes and held her body close to his to lessen the weight.

AFTER a staggering moment, they came to the bottom and into an alley. A voice said from close by:

"Why the hell didn't you give me more time? You might have messed the whole deal!"

Jeff turned about as he set the girl down so that he was between her and the other man. A faint blur of light filtered down through the rain from the windows above.

"Hurry up," Fat said. "We ain't got no time to lose—" Then he saw his mistake and flung around with an oath. But Jeff was too quick for him and smashed him over the ear with a gun barrel. He sprawled down without so much as a grunt.

Three horses were stamping close by. Jeff took a chance and checked the stirrups on the smallest one. He was right. They had been shortened for the girl.

"Mount up," he grunted. "That guy was right about the time."

Nan Carson swung into the saddle as Jeff vaulted aboard a long-legged bay.

Running footsteps thundered above in Taylor's rooms.

"That was your outfit that pulled out for the north?"

"Yes. Rex White is in charge now that Steve is away. He's an old ex-marshal from Dodge that dad hired a few months ago when the trouble started here."

"Then you strike out and catch 'em," Jeff directed. "Start 'em for that old cabin on the Birdtail. Your brother's there with a rifle slug in him and we'll need help. Tell 'em that my name's Jeff Allen and that I come from your father in Texas!"

"Then you know where dad is?" the girl said eagerly. "Is he—"

"He got hurt some down south," Jeff said briefly. "But he's coming along all right. Get going now!"

"I'm going with you to the Birdtail," Nan Carson said flatly. "Rex White must have some plan of his own and I wouldn't know where to find him. He doesn't even know I'm in town. I'm supposed to be at the ranch-house but I followed in after Steve."

There was a shout from above and the clatter of boots on the stairs.

"Come on then," Jeff said and wheeled his horse to the south. Side by side, he and Nan Carson thundered down the alley.

In a narrow crossway between buildings, a man appeared on the run. He showed only a darker shadow in the night until the red spit of his gun made a splash of color.

Jeff rode the shadow down at a dead gallop. He felt his horse falter with the impact but an instant later, he righted himself and was running free again. He came up with the girl who had surged ahead.

For a time, they rode in furious silence. Conversation was impossible. The wind and rain lashed their faces blindingly. They counted entirely on their horses except for general direction.

When they struck the timber beyond the stage road, the girl pulled up sharply.

"There's a short way across to the Birdtail. The river crossing is bad, but Steve and I used to go that way in the summer time."

"We'd best use it if you can find it in the dark," Jeff said briefly. "Those other two have a long lead on us."

Nan threw her head to get the water from her eyes. "I can find it, but we'll have to go up to the regular ford if the river is too high."

"We'll risk it," Jeff decided. "Let's go."

Without another word, the girl swung her horse away from the road and into the timber. Jeff was awed by the way she trusted his word. As yet, he hadn't even had a chance to tell her all about her father.

CHAPTER V

Tardy Salvation

WHEN the two riders came down to the bank of the river, Jeff Allen needed only a glance to tell him that the stream was rising fast. Already, it was far higher than when he had crossed it earlier in the evening.

The hissing rush of water was jet-black and threatening in the faint, shadowless moonlight that filtered through the storm clouds.

"The mouth of the Birdtail is straight across," Nan declared. "We'd better try for the sandbar there."

"Listen," Jeff said. "You've done your part in showing me the way here and that short-legged cayuse of yours was never meant for deep water. I'll go across here and when things are settled over yonder, I'll meet you up at the regular ford."

"I'm going to Steve!" Nan's tone left no room for argument and before Jeff could stop her, she had cut her horse with the reins and plunged into the torrent.

Allen swore in his throat as he spurred after her. For a moment, she was lost from sight. Then he made her out again and, in that same instant, her horse went down.

The lashing rain blurred the whole surface of the river. It hid the wash of the struggling animal. Jeff gave a shout of encouragement as he headed down stream.

The current set in toward the other shore with a wicked cross rip and even Jeff's tall horse had to swim part of the time in deep water.

Allen knew a quick, biting fear when he overtook Nan's floundering horse and saw that she was no longer mounted. Then he saw her head and shoulders come to the surface a few feet away. He snatched out and caught her just as she was going under again, yanked her desperately toward his saddle.

But the extra strain was more than the black could stand. He struggled gallantly as he went down and over.

Jeff kicked free in time to prevent being rolled under and held his grip on the girl with a dogged determination. A million black, clawing hands of water pulled him down, twisted and strangled him, but he came to the top at last. He lifted Nan's head into the crook of his left arm and struck out for shore.

All sense of direction had been lost while they were under but Jeff knew the stream should be striking him from the right and he used that to guide him. After a moment that seemed hours, his feet struck bottom and he dragged the girl out onto an open gravel bar.

Jeff's half-frozen muscles were cramped and knotted. There was a dull, grinding ache in the pit of his water-logged stomach and he got his breath only in long heaving gasps. For a while he stood with Nan held hard against him to support her. Then he shook her gently and said:

"Well, lady, we're across."

She tightened her hold on him for an instant before she stepped back and her voice was thin with strain. "We lost both the horses, didn't we?"

"They'll get out on one side or the other," Jeff told her. "But it's hopeless looking for them in the dark. When you're ready, we'll go on afoot."

"I'm ready now. Are we far below the Birdtail?"

"We didn't wash down far," Jeff reasoned. "But it's a safe guess we're below the mouth. If we aim to get any good out of all this, we'd better be going."

The side stream came spitting down into the river a hundred yards above the gravel bar.

Jeff took the girl's arm to steady her as they waded across and he saw that she was rigid with cold. "We'll take it on the run," he said. "We've got to get the blood moving and be in shape to do your brother some good." He held her hand as they went.

IN the rough, slippery going, Nan's soaked riding skirt clung confiningly to her. Time and again she stumbled and half fell, but she kept pluckily on. Jeff could hear the strain of her breathing but there was warmth coming back into her hand and he allowed no rest.

It seemed a long way before the faintly lighter space of the clearing showed ahead. They slowed to a cautious walk.

In the black shadow of the last trees, they paused to listen. But there was nothing but the brawling of the stream and the storm in the pines.

Jeff got his Colt gun out to check the freedom of its action.

"If they're ahead of us, there'll be a fight right now," he told his companion in a tense whisper. "If we beat them here, there'll be a fight when they come. Either way, you'd better stick pretty close to me."

"What about Doctor Taylor?"

"Allowing for him getting his horse and all," Jeff pointed out, "those gunslingers likely got out of town ahead of him. We'll soon know."

Feeling their way inch by inch, their very breath guarded, they went across the weed-grown clearing. Jeff had his gun ready in his hand. He hoped the wetting hadn't hurt it. The girl was a step behind him.

The outline of the cabin showed in the night. A wind-whipped stream of water from the eaves splattered down into a puddle.

Jeff led the way close up against the wall and for a long while they stood dead still listening. There was no sound that did not belong to the night. A faint whiff of woodsmoke was in the air.

Jeff leaned over and down to put his face into the wet hair over Nan's ear. "You wait here while I look inside."

She touched his hand briefly in agreement and confidence.

Jeff eased along the wall until he came to the door. He pushed gently upon it with his left hand and thumbed back the hammer of his gun with his right.

The yielding door squeaked on its hinges. It scraped noisily. The scent of wood smoke was stronger.

Jeff went in sidewise. He flattened himself against the wall.

It was utterly dark except for a yellow-red bank of coals in the fireplace. He couldn't see or hear a thing so he said softly: "Steve?"

His low voice sounded loud and harsh in the still. There was no answer. He went across to the bunk on tip-toe. He touched the table as he went by but he didn't rattle it. Then his hand found one of the bed posts and he stopped to listen again. A heavy dread settled upon him and he thought of the girl outside.

Men with gunshot wounds breathe heavily or not at all. There was no single sound in the cabin.

Jeff ran his hand down the post and in across the bunk. A low, furious oath broke from his lips.

Nan's voice, thin with fear, came from the doorway. "What is it? Is he—"

"He ain't here," Jeff said. "There ain't anything here. Even the bedding is gone!"

A GUST of wind from the open door puffed an ember to a flame for a moment and the room was lighted briefly with a feeble glow. Every single thing was as Jeff had left it except that the bunk was empty. No extra wood had been added to the fire.

"We are too late, then—" Nan's voice sounded hollow and very far away.

Jeff went across and laid a comforting arm around her shoulders, drew her gently inside and closed the door.

"Easy now," he said. "Maybe this could be worse. If Steve was dead, they wouldn't have bothered to take him with them. And if they'd just wanted to finish him, they'd have done it here."

"But what can we do? Where would they take him?"

"Well," Jeff said slowly, "there ain't a thing for us to do but wait for daylight so we can pick up their trail. Doctor Taylor will likely be drifting in pretty soon. At any rate, we couldn't get back across the river in the dark without horses."

Nan came across to the fire then and Jeff heaped on fresh wood. When it was going, he helped the girl from the doctor's dripping coat.

Her sodden skirt lay flat across the graceful line of her thigh and her small breasts were sharply moulded beneath the clinging wet of her blouse. Jeff was suddenly and wholely aware that she was beautiful. But there was something more than mere beauty; there was the fine-tempered steel of courage about her. There was a pride of strength and bearing that drew his complete respect.

"You haven't told me much about yourself," she reminded. "Only that your name was Jeff Allen and that you came from my father."

Jeff saw that her eyes were the same fearless gray of her brother's. The danger and threat of the night had left no shadow of fear there.

"Well that was about most of it," he told her. "My uncle and I bought your father's trail herd to fatten on our spread down south. He delivered the stock two days before our money came to pay him, and in between, somebody took a shot at him from the brush."

Nan caught her breath, lifted a quick hand to her throat but Jeff Allen shook his head.

"Wait a bit. Whoever shot him, made the mistake of thinking he'd been paid off for the cattle. When he didn't find the money, he left him for dead and pulled out. After a while, your dad came to and got back to our ranch. We put him to bed, got a doctor. He's going to be all right."

Nan met his eyes squarely. "How bad is it?"

Jeff liked the way she stood very straight before him and held her voice even when she asked that question.

"It's a lot more painful than dangerous. The bullet came in from the back and struck his right shoulder blade. He'll be riding again in a few weeks."

THE girl's eyes flashed. "There was more than just robbery in shooting him down! It's part of the whole thing that's been going on here. It's Colbath's work!"

Jeff nodded. "Your father mentioned that name too. As soon as he could talk, he told me about the land patents you people hold on the Big Smoky Basin. He told me how the payments had to be made the end of this month or the land reverts. The next day, I took the cash and headed upcountry. I figured to find Steve in time to take up those patents."

Nan's eyes clouded at mention of her brother's name. "Steve was worried because we got no news from dad. He was starting south to find what was the matter. He says it's a rustler outfit built up among the nesters behind this, not Colbath."

"Your father believes that Colbath is here," Jeff said. "He told me about the Mexican that was killed just after he'd let it drop that Colbath had moved in. That's about all I got. Who is this man?"

Nan spread her hands helplessly. "That's just it. Everybody in the northern cattle country had heard of him and the ruin that he leaves on his trail but nobody can point him out! He may have changed his name and be posing as a nester. If he's here he's clever enough to make it look as if a dozen little nester outfits have simply joined together to fight us."

"And when I hit town, you thought I was another of these nester gunslingers?"

"Yes. I was supposed to stay at the ranch but I sneaked into town. I was there when Steve's horse came in without him. Then I saw you come in from the river trail and leave your horse with the enemy and pick a fight with our riders. When you went to the doctor's I hoped I could make you tell me what had happened to Steve."

"I didn't start that fight at the hotel," Jeff explained with a dry smile. "But when it came up, it looked like a pretty good way to find a doctor without getting anybody suspicious. You see I didn't know who was who then or that the lad I'd pulled from the river, was the hombre I'd come north to find."

"But with the gunhawks ready to shoot you down," Nan protested, "you should have—"

"But I didn't think anybody knew who I was," Jeff said and smiled grimly. "I knew that somebody had been ghosting my trail all the way up from Texas. Almost every day I'd cut the trail of a singlefoot horse with a lame cast in his off front leg but I never could get sight of anybody. All I could do, was play his own game and travel the open country by night. My shadow was only about ten minutes

ahead of me at the river crossing and after I'd downed the drygulcher, I thought I'd settled his hash at last. I didn't know that it was another man I'd drilled and word of my coming had reached town ahead of me."

Nan swung full around to face him, put both hands on his arm. "But Jeff, we've got to do something. You've brought the money through, all right, but all the land in the world is no good without Steve!"

"I know that," Jeff said soothingly. "And it'll not come night again before we have him back. In the meantime, we're stuck here. You get off some of those wet clothes and dry them out before the fire. I'm going outside for a spell to see what I can find. I'll knock and give you time to dress before I come back."

Nan gave his arm a convulsive little squeeze and he saw a flash of grateful confidence in her eyes.

"You won't go too far, will you? Somehow, when you're here I feel—that everything is going to be all right."

"It is going to be all right," Jeff promised. "And I won't go far. I just want to check and see if there are any barns or sheds around and if so, what's in 'em."

"There's just a little lean-to stable in back of the house," Nan said. "But they wouldn't have taken him there. It's all falling to pieces."

"You get yourself dried out," Jeff repeated. "I'll be back after a spell."

CHAPTER VI

Lobo Unmasked

OUTSIDE, there had been no slackening of the rain. Jeff waited a minute while his eyes got used to being away from the fire. Then he went around the cabin and cautiously up the hill into the timber.

A little way up, he made out the darker smudge of another building. He went close to the wall and listened, but he couldn't hear a thing.

There had been a door on the lower side but it had fallen away. Jeff went inside.

Water was dripping with dull monotony on some old piece of tin. Faint blotches of light showed where there were holes in the roof. The place smelled dank and musty.

Jeff's hands were still nearly dry. He got out his match case and struck a light. He closed his eyes an instant before the yellow glare and when he opened them again, it was to look at the huge, booted and slickered figure of a man who stood four feet away with a drawn Colt's gun in his hand.

It was Oliver, the man he had smashed down in the Big Smoky bar and his lips were peeled back from his teeth in a wolfish grin!

"Well, I'll be damned," Jeff said. "If it ain't the hasty guy again and all steamed up to explode some more. You sure didn't waste much time in sorting me out."

"You ain't going to trick your way out of this," the man said hoarsely.

"Well," Jeff suggested, "you might let the personal angle ride for a little. I'm a Carson man and it seems to me we'll all be needed for a while."

"Damn your slippery ways!" Oliver snarled and Jeff saw by his eyes that he was going to shoot.

He snuffed the match as he went for his own gun but even as he ripped it from its sheath, he knew he was too late.

There was a blinding shower of fire and sparks. The earth seemed to come up in a swirling rush to smash Jeff Allen in the face and hurl him backward into a bottomless pit of darkness.

Jeff Allen's return to consciousness was slow. He lay for a long time only vaguely thinking. At last he realized that the cramped agony of his muscles was due to his being sprawled out on the muddy ground. It was growing a bit lighter, and the rain had slacked off to a drizzle.

Moving was misery to his cramped muscles but he forced himself to his

knees with his arms. There was a big smear of clotted blood in the dirt where his head had been. His exploring fingers found a deep gash over his right ear where a bullet had passed.

Jeff used the door jamb to pull himself up. He was desperately stiff from having lain so long in the cold and wet. He stood a little, letting his balance come back.

It still wasn't full daylight. It was so dark inside the lean-to he couldn't see and he didn't waste any time there. He picked up his gun from the mud where he had fallen and went down the hill as swiftly as he could move.

THE door of the cabin was standing open. Inside, the table had been tipped over and one of the box chairs had been smashed. There wasn't anybody there.

Jeff saw his own bottle of whiskey where he had left it under the bunk. He went over and sat down, took a long drink to get the blood moving again. Very carefully, he started putting things together in his mind.

His first thought that Oliver might have followed there to protect the girl, didn't make sense. Nan would never have consented leaving him—at least not unless it was certain he was dead.

On the other hand, if Oliver were a Colbath man in the Carson ranks, it would solidly explain his desire to pick a fight with Jeff back at the hotel. Anything would serve better than that Allen should report the events of the river crossing to loyal Carson riders.

It was getting to be full day. Jeff couldn't see any single thing to do but try his luck at finding the kidnaper's trail and get to moving. He was still a little dizzy but he felt a lot stronger after his drink. He went outside again.

There were no tracks in the yard except his own coming down from the shed. The rain had smeared out all the others.

Jeff had it in his mind that Oliver had likely left his horse in the timber above the lean-to. He went back over his own tracks.

He knew that the gunman had gone through his pockets. A sack of tobacco, some papers and a soaked bandana lay where they had been dumped by the entrance to the shed. Jeff passed them by and went inside. There he stopped dead in his tracks, an oath exploding from his lips.

Oliver's great bulk lay spraddled out in a corner of the littered dirt floor. His face was still frozen in the wolfish grin of triumph that Jeff had seen in his last instant of consciousness. His gun lay close to his hand and he was completely dead.

For a long dull moment, Jeff stood still looking down. His battered wits almost refusing to believe what he saw.

"I must have done him in just as he got me," he muttered aloud. "I guess the poor explosive devil was square after all, and the girl just cracked and lined out when the shooting started. I guess there ain't but one damn thing left to do. I'll have to see if I can find where them other coyotes took Steve."

He went out through the single stall to the back. A hundred feet away in the timber, he saw what he was looking for. There was a gray-white horse tied to a tree. It whinnied with eagerness to be free when it saw Jeff running toward it.

Allen's hand shook as he loosed the tie rope and swung into the saddle. Oliver's long stirrups were almost exactly right and Jeff rode fifty yards into the forest and back to prove the grim suspicion that was building in his mind.

The horse was a singlefooter and it was lame in the off front leg!

Jeff hauled up and sat for a moment considering. His face was drawn into hard, bleak lines.

From the doctor's stairway, he'd seen a man on this horse riding out

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5.25-17	2.45	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.45	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.60	1.15
5.50-17	2.75	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.75	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.75	1.15
6.00-17	2.85	1.15
30x6.00-18	2.85	1.15
31x6.00-19	2.85	1.15
32x6.00-20	2.95	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.10	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.20	1.35
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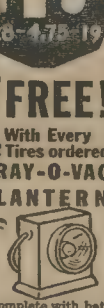

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of town. It must have been Oliver. With him, had been another man. That other man could be the one who had taken Steve away, while the giant Oliver had remained on the chance that Jeff would come and still have the money on him.

Nan likely had seen she must go for help at the burst of shooting and if she could make the river crossing, was likely back in town or at the Carson ranch. In any event he had a solid faith in her ability to look out for herself.

It seemed the best procedure for him was to try to seek out the trail of the second man, track him down and shoot him loose from the injured Steve Carson.

Without thinking, Jeff thumbed a fresh shell from his cartridge belt and got out his gun. For a moment after he had swung the cylinder open, he didn't realize what it was that made the hackle hairs rise along the back of his neck. Then his mind got to working again and he knew. There was no exploded shell in his gun.

Some third man had gunned Oliver an instant after the latter had dropped Jeff. The position of the body and the expression on Oliver's face proved that. Then without bothering to make sure that Jeff was completely dead, that third man had searched his pockets, taken the girl from the cabin and vanished into the night.

It couldn't have been the doctor because he would have known at once that Jeff was alive and not badly hurt. If Taylor had come at all during the night, it seemed likely that he had come later, found the cabin empty and returned to town.

The rain had made all tracks old tracks. An Indian couldn't follow a trail a hundred yards. Jeff couldn't see any single thing in the whole mess that made sense. Perhaps he could find out something in Powderhorn. He swung the lame singlefooter around and headed grimly for town.

(*Continued on page* 122)

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(*Continued from page* 120)

Jeff had to take a chance on the open ford of the main trail to get across the thundering Big Smoky. But he passed it without event and, once beyond, swung into the timber.

After half an hour, he came to the stage road and pulled up for a cautious survey. The rain had settled down again in a cold, pitiless drive that bit to the marrow of Jeff's aching bones. He'd had no food since noon of the day before. Exposure and loss of blood had left him weak.

He rounded out a loop through the pine woods and an hour later, rode down a rutted lane that came into Powderhorn from the west.

There was an abandoned barn where the last of the trees grew above the town. He left the white horse there and went on afoot. He kept close to the scattered buildings that made up the outskirts of Powderhorn.

The rain-thinned smoke of a few breakfast fires showed here and there but he didn't see anybody until he took a cautious look into the alley back of Doctor Taylor's place.

The man, Fat, was standing in the narrow shelter at the bottom of the stairs. He was smoking a cigarette and he had a rifle under his arm.

Jeff swore softly. As far the enemy knew, he was dead and out of the picture and he couldn't afford to give his advantage away by shooting it out with this man. He'd have to try another way.

He circled back around three buildings and came into the alley at a point where the angle of Fat's shelter hid him from view. Swiftly he went across the muddy way and down the other side, hugging the wall close.

The sound of water running off the eaves muffled Jeff's careful steps. Three feet from the stairway entrance, he halted and flattened himself against the wall.

The guard's horse stood twenty feet farther on. Jeff took a rock from the mud and weighed it in his hand. He

leaned back a little and threw it, arcing it high above the level of the doorway. His aim was bad but his purpose was served. The horse snorted and plunged in alarm.

Fat's rifle slid into the alley, his head followed. He was looking the other way. Jeff Allen hit him over the ear with the barrel of his six-gun. The man never even grunted as he went down.

Jeff looked both ways. There was no one in sight. He went inside and dragged the fat man after him. He had hit him in the same spot as the night before and he knew that he wouldn't come to for a long time.

The work of dragging the body took a lot out of Allen. But he didn't waste any time resting. He took off his boots so that he would make no noise when he went up the stairs.

AT the top, he stopped to listen. There wasn't a sound. He had his gun in his right hand as he pushed gently on the door with his left. It was unlatched and gave easily.

One look was enough to show Jeff what he had walked into. But there wasn't a damn thing he could do.

Doctor Taylor sat in the middle of the room lashed to a chair. There was a little line of blood running from his lips.

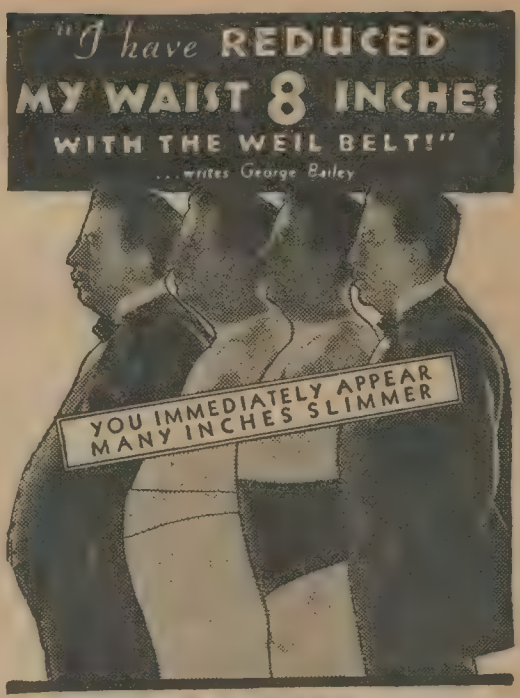
Rex White was crouched in back of Taylor and he had a gun jammed against the old man's head.

"Drop that gun and come in," White said softly. "I just happened to make a check on Fat while you were dragging him in from the street. I was glad to see that our hasty friend hadn't finished you."

Jeff couldn't shoot because of Taylor so he dropped his gun on the floor and went inside. The old man said with grim disgust:

"Why the hell didn't you take a chance. You're a hell of a guy!"

"One more cheep out of you and I'll squirt your brains at him," White said harshly.



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Jeff took his hat off and dumped the water from the rim. "This is the damnedest country I ever saw," he said gravely. "It rains all the time and there's always somebody cussing you out about something."

"All right, hard guy," White ordered. "Get a chair and come sit with tight mouth. One of you guys is going to tell me what you've done with that money if I have to cut your guts out and see if you swallowed it!"

Jeff lifted a questioning eyebrow. "Money?"

"Never mind," White snapped. "Joe Oliver was a damn fool and should have killed you and gotten the money between here and Texas, but he did have brains enough to know that you brought the cash up with you."

Jeff Allen ran a puzzled hand across his eyes. "Wait a minute," he said. "Let me get this straight. If you're the guy that killed Oliver, you went through my pockets. Why the hell are you asking me about that roll?"

A murderous light flashed in White's eyes. "Yes, I fixed Oliver. Nobody that rides with me ever lives to blunder more than once. But you ain't fooling me about that cash. It wasn't on you, but you're going to tell me where it is."

"The hell I am," Jeff said flatly. "The whereabouts of that money is the only thing between me and sudden death. You ain't apt to finish me until I tell you." He took a straight chair and carried it over near Taylor's.

REX WHITE moved around to face them both and a thin, mirthless smile pulled at his lips.

"I see you don't know what you're up against," he said softly and waved his gun toward a door that led into another bedroom. "The doc's got Steve Carson spread out in there and I've got his sister waiting for me down the street a way. She thinks I killed you out on the Birdtail to save her from being kidnaped by the guy that killed her brother. It wouldn't take much extra talk to make her

think you'd come to and gotten into town to murder Taylor and finish your job on Steve."

"Like all blood-crazy wolves, you're crazy," Jeff derided. "You'd leave plenty of holes behind you!"

"Listen," White said, "I—" He cut off as running footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Jeff stood by the chair he'd brought across the room. The hackle hairs were up along the back of his neck.

Rex White came across the room in a single bound. The menace of his gun made orders needless.

Then the door flung open and Nan Carson burst in.

There was an instant of breathless silence while the girl raised her hand to her breast.

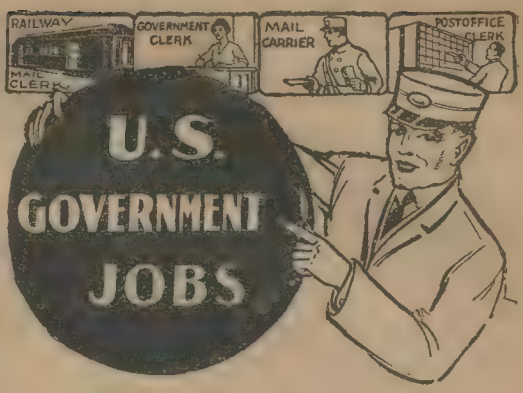
"There goes your apple cart," Jeff said. "I told you this country was crazy."

White's gun muzzle was pressed hard into the small of Jeff's back. With every ounce of his power, he drove himself back against it. The force of the thrust cramped the weapon over as it exploded and the bullet scorched harmlessly across the skin of his ribs.

Jeff got a hold on the gun barrel as he and White crashed down. He held on hard as he twisted about and buried his head under the other man's chin to escape the savage mauling of his left fist.

For a moment, the pain of the blows on his injured head blinded and sickened him. Things started to go black. Then by sheer power of will, he brought himself back and raised up. With every ounce of his strength, he started hammering away at the other man's face.

Somehow, above the fury of his effort, he heard boots drumming on the front stairs and saw Nan Carson running that way with his gun that she had picked up from the floor. Jeff kept on slugging with the power of desperation. He knew vaguely that he couldn't last much longer.



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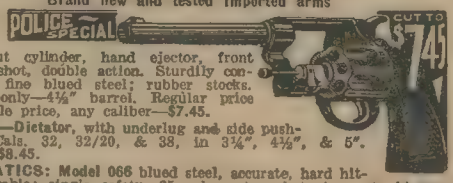

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There were shouts from the front of the building and a quick burst of shots.

In a daze, Jeff kept mauling away until he heard the old doctor say: "You don't have to keep that up any longer, son. He looks pretty dead to me."

Jeff got up then and was surprised to find that he had White's gun in his left hand. He started toward the front office on reeling legs. But at the door, he met Nan coming back.

She still had his gun in her hand and a look of triumph flamed in her eyes. "It's our old riders from the ranch," she cried. "They've got Curt and are surrounding the—" Then she saw Jeff's battered head and ran to meet him in quick concern. "Oh, Jeff, you—"

"Shucks now," he said. "I'm all right." But his knees gave way under him and he sank wearily into the nearest chair.

"If you'll get me loose from here," Taylor snapped, "I'll fix that young wildcat up. He's lost plenty of blood already."

Nan went swiftly to obey. Then she helped Jeff get off his coat and shirt so that the doctor could attend to the bullet crease on his side, after he had finished with the head wound.

Jeff sat in silence through the whole painful business. He could hear horses and men moving in the alley and in the front. Things seemed to be all right then and enormous fatigue settled upon him.

"How about Steve, Doc? Where'd you get him and how is he?"

"He's in yonder with a sleeping powder holding him down," Taylor explained. "And he's going to be all right. I got him because I took a short-cut to the Birdtail and beat everybody else to him. I met those two gun-slingers on the way back but I lay low in the pines and let 'em go by. I thought I'd be safe here until you came back, but White guessed the truth and came to finish the job and get the money that he apparently

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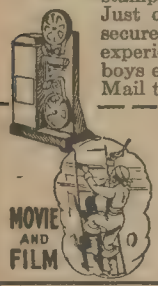

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couldn't find on you. He'd already sent all Carson's loyal riders back to the ranch."

"Well," Jeff demanded, "why didn't you give him the money?"

"Give it to him?" Taylor snorted. "You're getting hazy. How could I give it to him?"

"You could have," Jeff grinned. "It's hidden inside the big roll of cotton in the bottom drawer on your desk. I put it there before we left for the Birdtail."

The doctor's battered lips twisted in a rueful grin. "And I was just saying you were a hell of a guy— Son, that skunk you just mangled, was Lew Colbath himself! He told me so when he was threatening to kill me."

There was a moment of silence and Nan moved close to Jeff Allen's chair.

"I was sure he was Colbath out on the Birdtail," she said and shuddered. "I had to make him think I believed him so I could get away. But, oh, Jeff—when he told me you were dead, it seemed as if—everything was ended and done. We'll never be able to thank you and repay you enough—"

"Now, wait a minute," Jeff said and reached out to take her hand in his. "I ain't a guy that does things for nothing. I'm like as not to ask for something someday."

The old doctor must have seen the answering light in the girl's eyes, for he closed the door discreetly behind him as he went into Steve's room.

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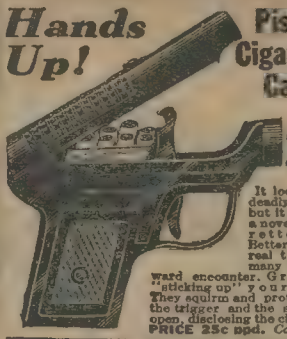

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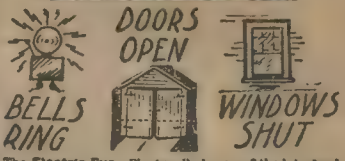

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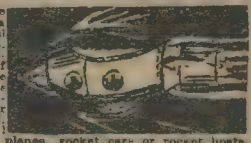

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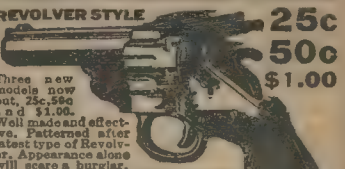

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